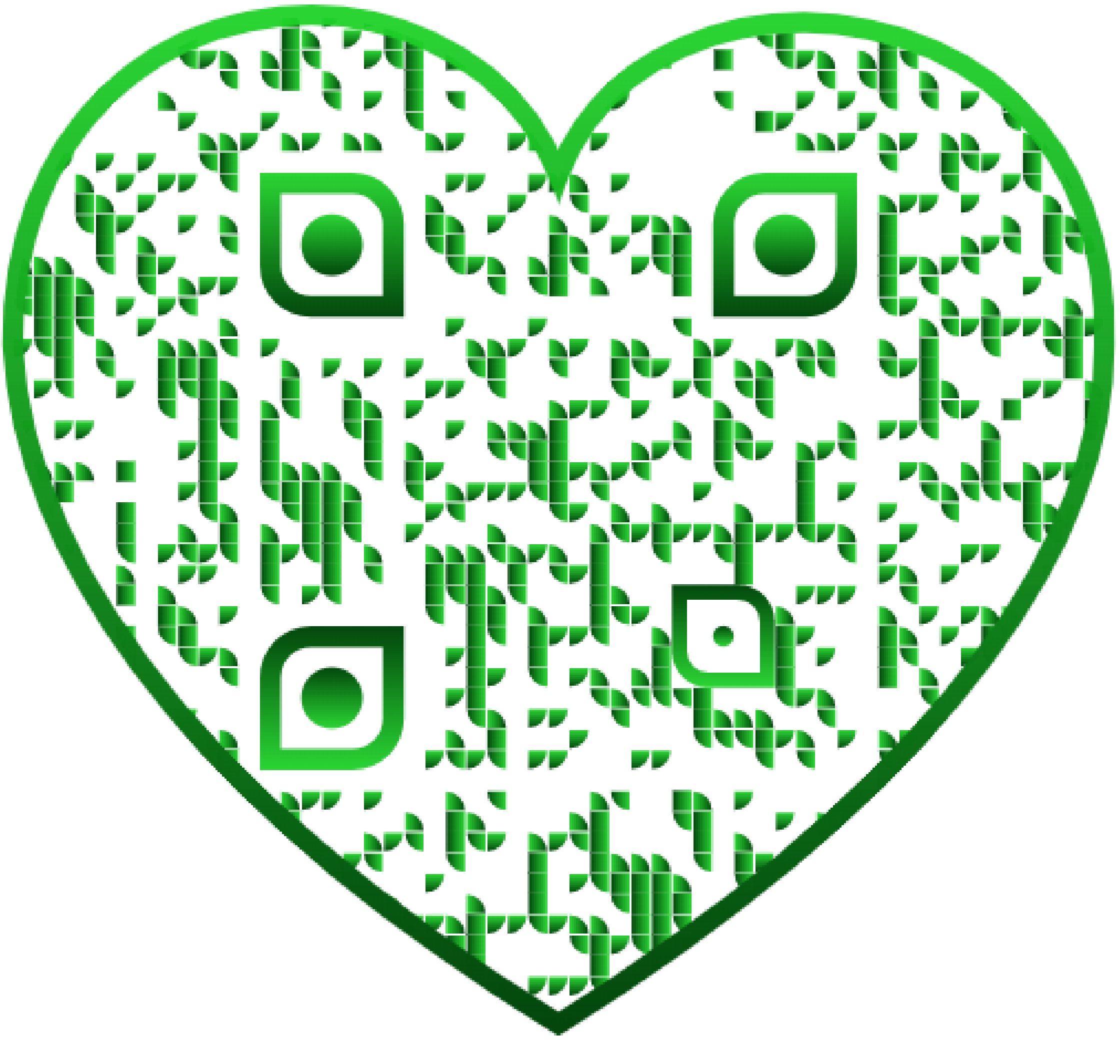
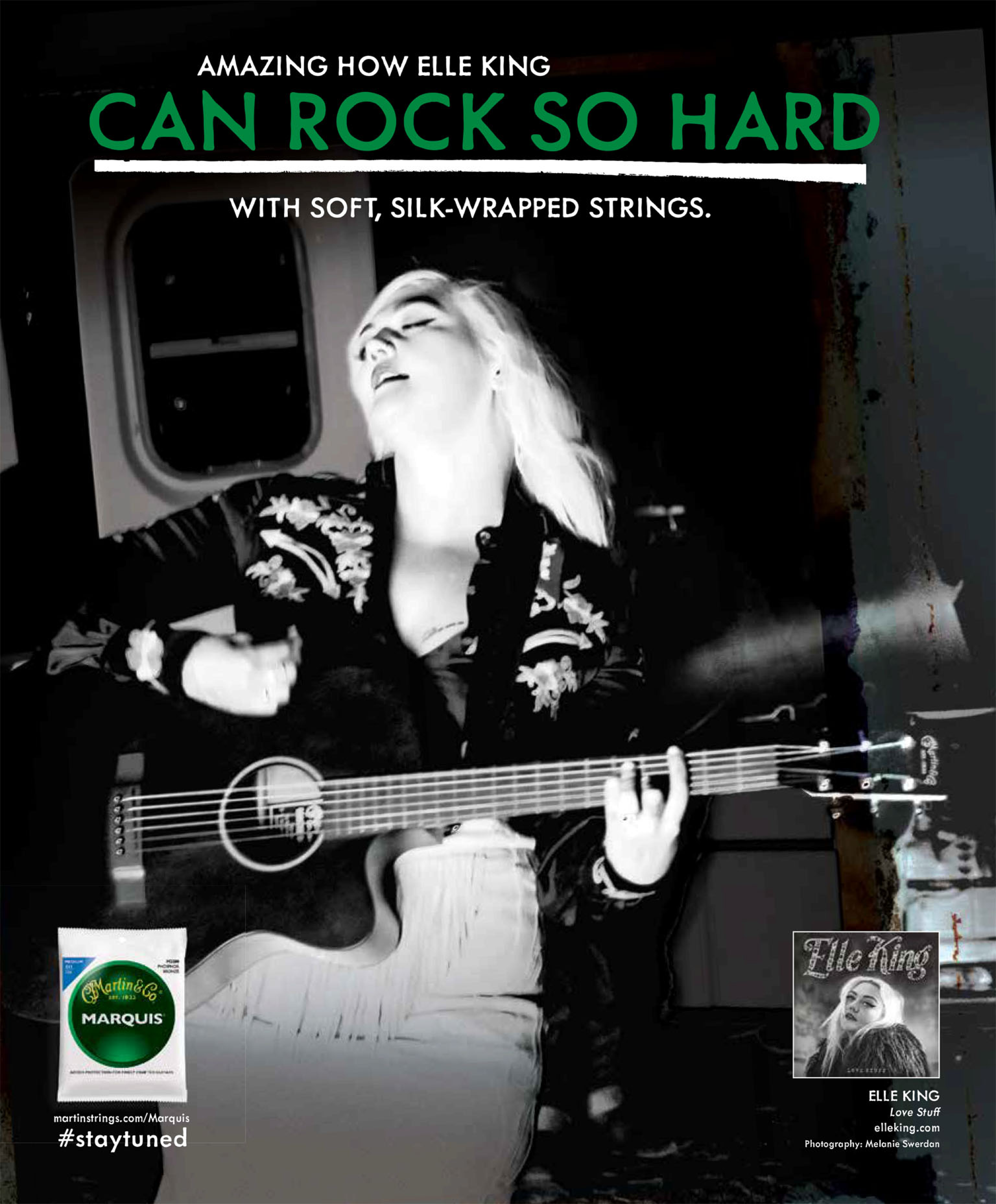
American
songwriter
the craft of music
September | October 2016
Vol. 31, No. 6
LOOK HOMEWARD,
ANGEL OLSEN
DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS
DO AMERICA
8 MUST-SEE ACTS
at AMERICANAFEST
Kris Kristofferson
THE DEVIL and the DETAILS

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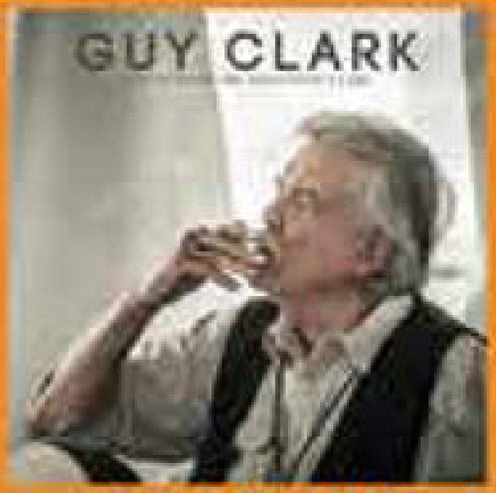

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AMERICAN SONGWRITER

VOLUME 31, NUMBER 6 | SEPTEMBER OCTOBER 2016

Kris Kristofferson

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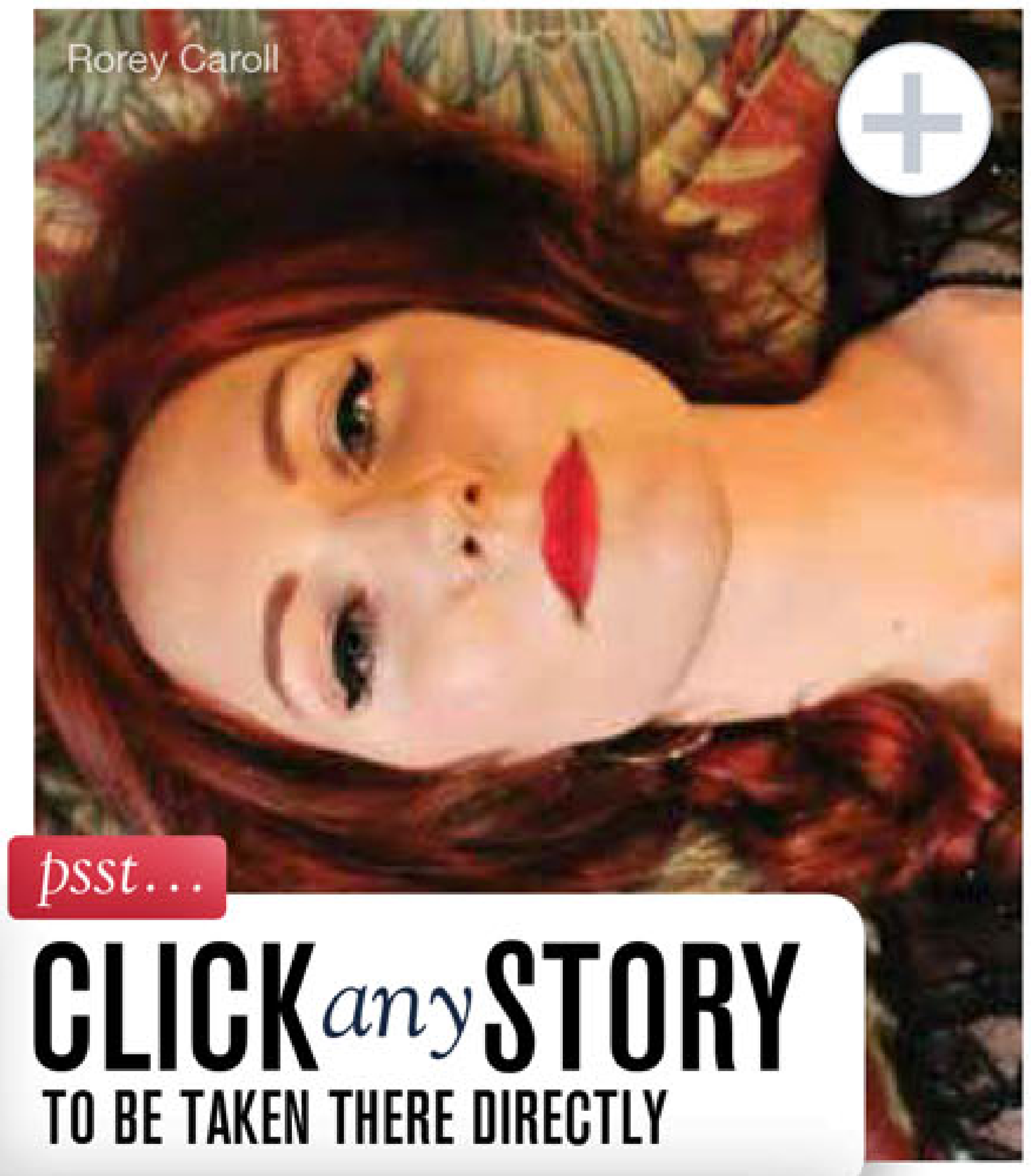
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Angel Olsen

COVER STORY

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON: THE DEVIL AND THE DETAILS
A reflection on the folk outlaw's prolific career.

FEATURES

LIVES OF THE PARTY
Eight great acts to catch at AmericanaFest 2016.

ST. PAUL AND THE BROKEN BONES: TO THE LIGHTHOUSE
The amped-up Bible Belters on gaining perspective.

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL OLSEN
The Asheville, North Carolina-based songwriter settles into a place that's not quite folk but not quite rock.

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS DO AMERICA
The veteran southern rockers navigate the nation's grand funk.

REVIEWS

NEW RELEASES
Michael Kiwanuka, Okkervil River, Lori McKenna, John Paul White, Shovels & Rope, Lucy Dacus, Cass McCombs, Kelsey Waldon

American Songwriter (ISSN08968993) USPS Periodical No. 001728 is published bi-monthly by ForASong Media, LLC, PO Box 330249, Nashville TN 37203. Periodicals Postage Paid at Nashville, TN and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to American Songwriter, P.O. Box 330249, Nashville TN 37203.

PORTRAITS

MARGARET GLASPY
Born At The Right Time

DORI FREEMAN
Blue Virginia Blues

NATURAL CHILD
Grow Your Own

ROREY CAROLL
The Hard Way

AMANDA SHIRES
Keeping The Home Fires Burning

SONGWRITER U

MEASURE FOR MEASURE
Write A Road Song

PAT PATTISON
Americana: Uncharted Territory

MAKIN' STUFF UP
No Respect For The Night Train

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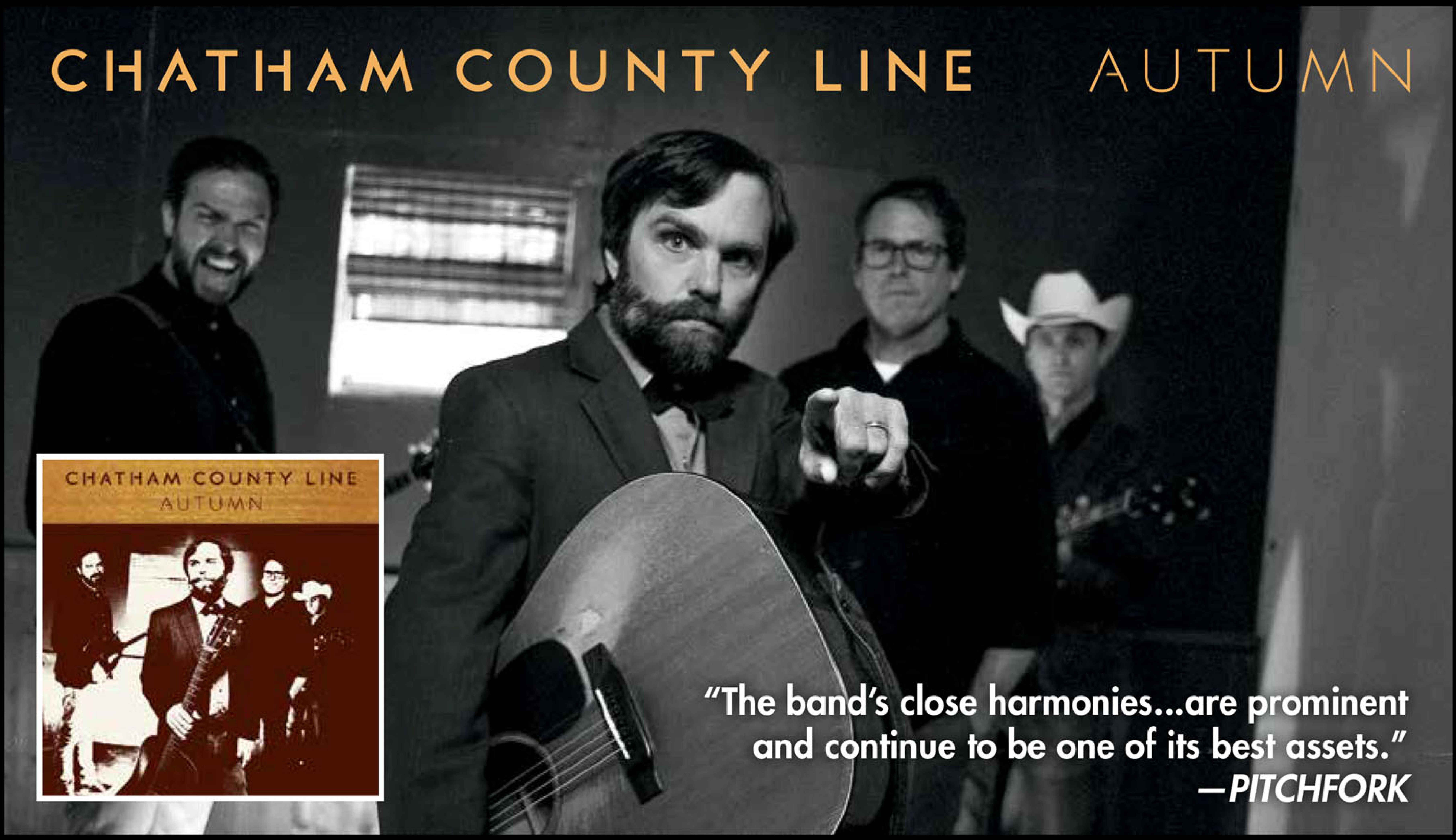
LYRIC CONTEST WINNERS

GEARING UP

SPECIAL COLUMN
Chris Thile Is Homeward Bound

AMERICAN ICONS
Ritchie Valens

BEHIND THE SONG
Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band, "Turn The Page"



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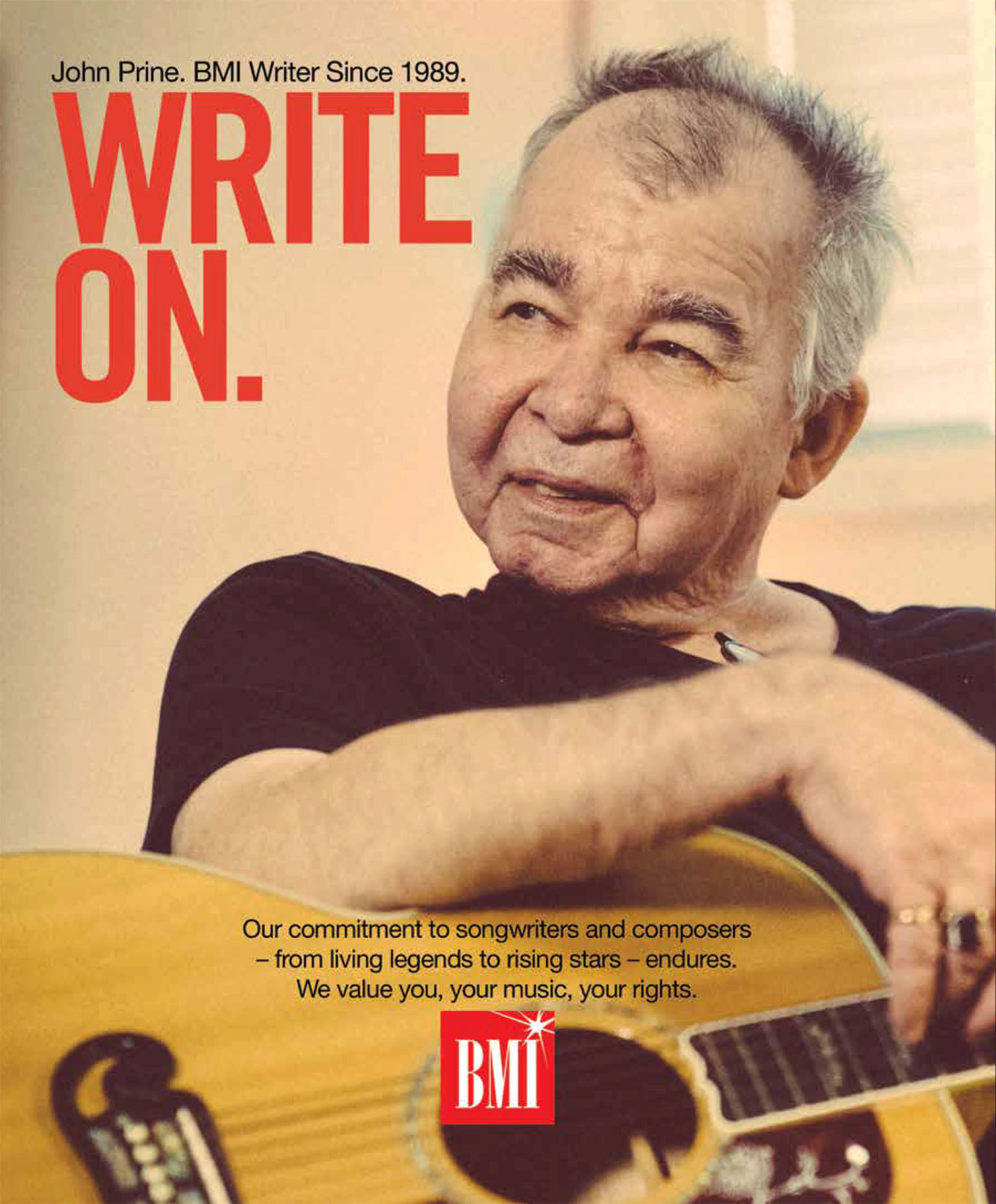
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American songwriter
the craft of music

AMERICAN SONGWRITER
Volume 31, No. 6

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WORDS TO LIVE BY

The first T-shirts we sold at the magazine featured a skull on the front and bore the phrase "Don't Die With The Music In You." They were quite popular, and a few readers went so far as to get a tattoo of the design.

We stole the line from self-help guru and motivational speaker Dr. Wayne Dyer. I take Dyer's somewhat cryptic saying to mean: Live the life you were born to live, and don't bury your gifts — musical or otherwise — within.

When Marissa Moss interviewed the late Guy Clark for a cover story in 2013, she asked him if he had any advice for her unborn child. He had the same idea. "Make him read Dylan Thomas and listen to Woody Guthrie," he said, "and don't die wishing you'd done something else."

Kris Kristofferson, our 80-year-old cover subject, likely won't die wishing he'd done something else. Since his days as a college student, he wanted to be a writer.

As a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in the '60s, Kristofferson fell under the influence of Romantic poet William Blake. Somewhere in his reading of the mystical bard he came across a passage that, for him, carried with it a life-altering message. He has even gone so far as to quote Blake's words verbatim in interviews, as a summation of his life's mission.

"He who is organized by the divine for spiritual communion, if he refuses and buries his talent in the earth, sorrow and desperation will pursue him for life, and after death, shame and confusion of face to eternity."

So, Kris was seized by a Blakean vision and moved to Nashville to write, turning down a teaching job at West Point. His family disowned him, or so the story goes.

Looking back on his career, it's clear he personifies what has come to be known as the Americana ethic. He has never been the most gifted singer or player but whatever skills he lacks in those departments he's more than made up for with his pen.

Our cover story is an appreciation of his songwriting talent, and several great contemporary lyricists pay tribute to his poetic gifts and trailblazing career. Kris was someone who "cleansed the doors of perception," to borrow a phrase from Blake, by showing Nashville what new heights were possible in song through his almost haiku-like precision.

The 17th annual AmericanaFest goes down later this month in Nashville, and you can read our profiles on eight hot acts playing this year's week-long extravaganza. Every one of them, whether directly or indirectly, has been influenced by Kristofferson to some degree.

As we wind down this long, hard slog of an election cycle, much of the songwriting world has been galvanized to write about political issues. The Drive-By Truckers return this month with *American Band*, an album of politically-tinged songs that survey the state of the Union. It's not so much a diatribe as it is a collection of personal and story songs inspired by the events of the day.

The album kicks off with "Ramon Casiano," which tells the story of a 15-year-old Latino youth by that name name who, in 1931, was shot to death in Laredo, Texas. The gunman was a then 17-year-old Texan named Harlon Carter who claimed self-defense (saying Casiano pulled a knife) and was sentenced to three years in jail, only to have the conviction overturned. Carter would go on to work as a border agent and later became head of the NRA in the '80s, which is when the story of the killing came to light, a story Carter initially claimed to have no knowledge of at that time.

"Making this album is about all I can do, and it's something but it's more about getting it out of my system than hoping I can change anything," says DBT's Mike Cooley, who wrote "Ramon Casiano."

Don't die with the music in you, indeed.

Caine O'Rear

Caine O'Rear
Editor-in-Chief

American Songwriter is published bi-monthly by ForASong Media, LLC, P.O. Box 330249, Nashville TN 37203. Phone: 615.321.6096 Fax: 615.321.6097. Cover Price is $6.99 per copy. Subscription rates in the U.S. are $19.95 for one year, $29.95 for two years and $39.95 for three years. For Canadian and Mexican subscriptions, add $6 per year and for foreign subscriptions, add $12 per year to the U.S. prices above. (All Canadian, Mexican and foreign subscriptions are payable in U.S. dollars only.) Send subscription inquiries to American Songwriter, P.O. Box 90187 Long Beach CA 90809. Or reach us by phone M-F 8AM - 5PM PST at 1-888-881-5861 or send us an email at americansongwriter@pfsmag.com. Reproduction in whole or part without express written consent of the publisher is prohibited. Copyright 2016 by ForASong Media, LLC. Opinions expressed by contributing writers do not necessarily reflect the views of American Songwriter. Song lyrics and other copyrighted material reprinted with permission. Printed in the U.S. by Publishers Press. American Songwriter is a registered trademark.

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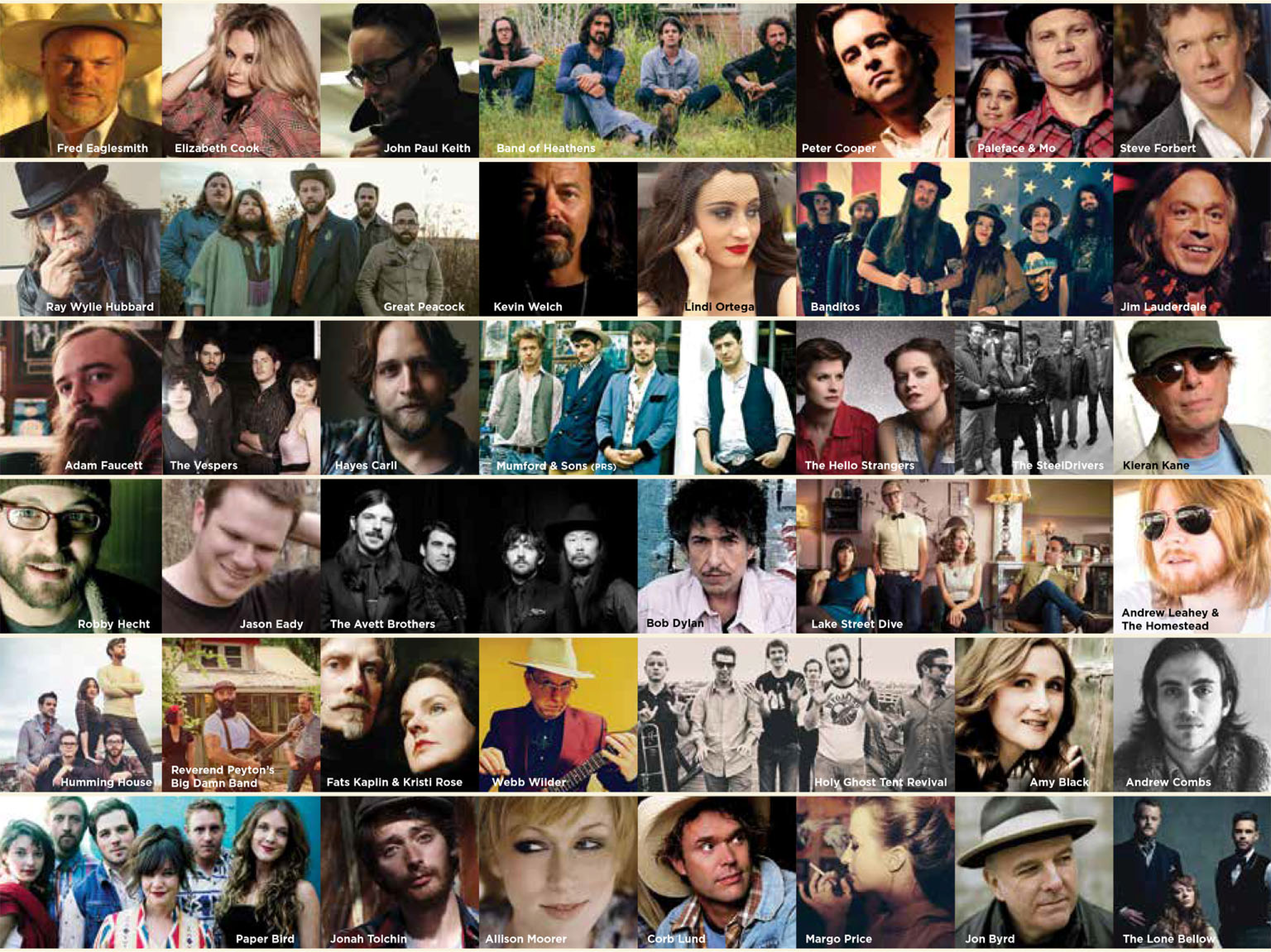

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AL CLAYTON

Photography's Atticus Finch

BY CAINE O'REAR

The photo of Kris Kristofferson on the cover of this edition was taken in 1971. The scene is the songwriter's Nashville apartment. It's likely early afternoon and our hero has just awoken.

The image was captured by Al Clayton, an eminent Southern photographer who was also a friend of Kristofferson's. The photo did not come out of an arranged photo shoot, and no managers or handlers were involved in its make-up. The papers and debris scattered on the bed and floor are not props, but tokens of a bohemian life. This is photo-vérité, if you will, a portrait of the artist as a rakish thirtysomething chasing down the muse in Music City.

In the late '60s and early '70s, it was Clayton's custom to take shots of Kristofferson and his songwriting compadres when they were hanging out as friends. His archives are teeming with shots of Nashville musicians in these settings, many of which were never commissioned for publication.

Scrolling through the archives, one finds a warmth and familiarity to the images not seen in a lot of today's music photography.

"It's like Kris's wife Lisa says, part of the attraction to dad was that you could tell how fond he was of the people he was with," says Al's daughter, Jennie Clayton. "He wasn't there to just get the picture and run away."

(The pictures in the cover story starting on page 50 were part of a *LOOK* magazine 1971 feature about country music.)

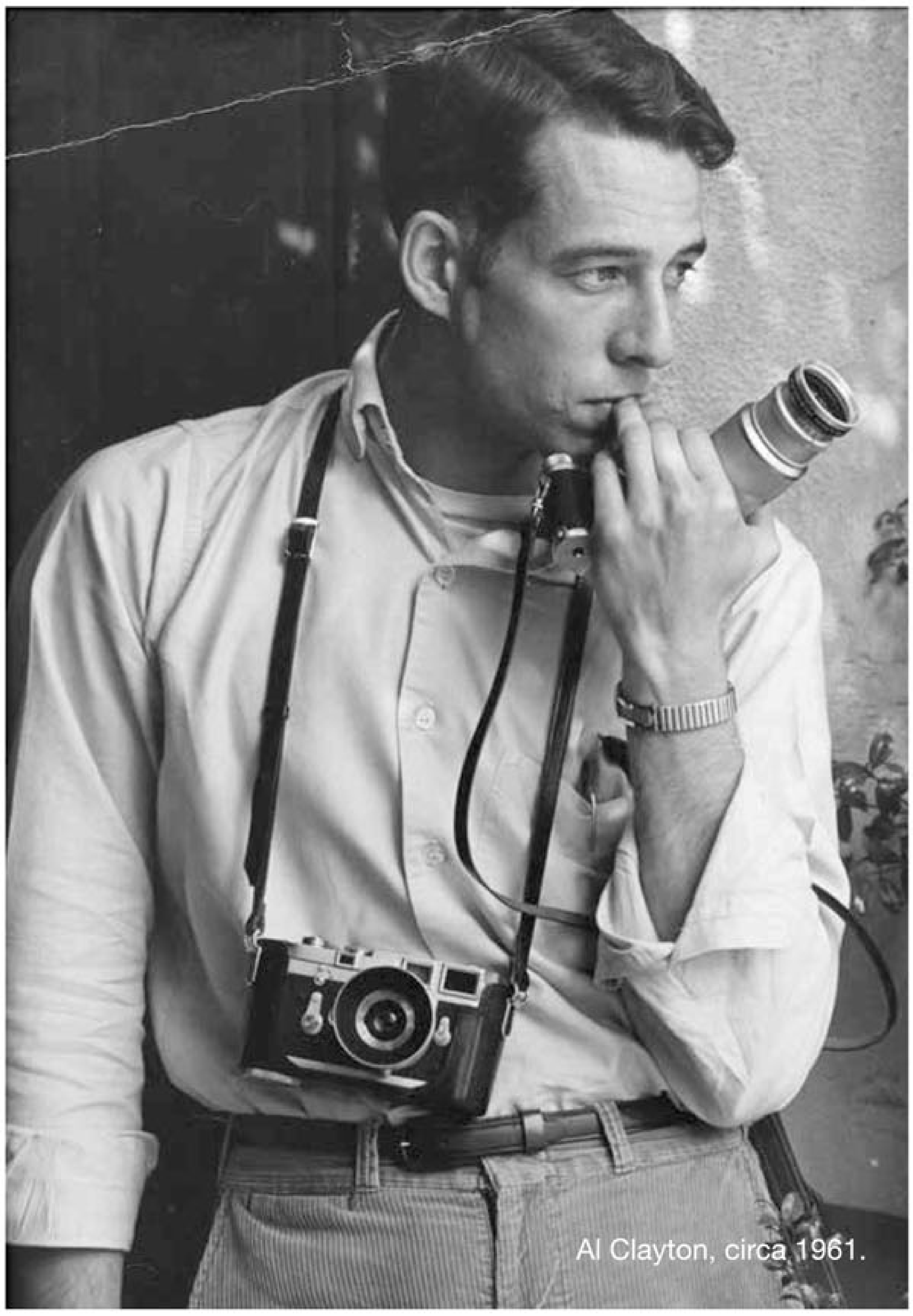
Jennie Clayton thinks her father, who passed away in 2014, first met Kris at a party at Johnny Cash's house. Bob Dylan was in town at the time working on *Nashville Skyline*, and Clayton had some shots of of the city he wanted to show Dylan for album cover consideration. As a kid, Jennie Clayton recalls attending cookouts with her dad, adding that Kristofferson was sometimes charged with the task of putting her to sleep by reading her a bedtime story, so the adults could keep on partying into the night.

******

Clayton was not really a music photographer by trade. Though he's well known for the work he did in the realm of food photography, notably for the John Egerton book *Southern Food: At Home, On The Road, In History (1987)*, his foremost passion was socio-political photojournalism.

"I worked with some of the best photographers on planet Earth, and Al Clayton was among the best of the best," says writer and journalist William Hedgepeth, a Georgia native who, as senior editor of *Look* magazine in the 1960s, struck up a relationship with Clayton. "There was no one quite like him, in terms of his dedicated sensitivity to putting oneself in the shoes of another."

In the late '60s, Clayton traveled to the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia with a group of doctors and documented the poverty and child hunger he witnessed. His photos found their way to a Congressional subcommittee hearing chaired by Senator Bobby Kennedy, which contributed to the overhaul of the Food Stamp Act, whereby the program was wrested from the hands of local authorities and put into the hands of the federal government.



Al Clayton, circa 1961.

Photo courtesy Al Clayton Photography, LLC

Hedgepeth was at the committee hearing that day and ended up publishing the photos in *Look*, and thus began a working relationship with Clayton. Later, they collaborated on an article for *Look* about child hunger called *The Hungry World of Teresa Pilgrim*, working as a sort of 2.0 version of James Agee and Walker Evans, the writer and photographer duo who produced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a seminal work on Depression-era Southern poverty.

In the late '60s, Clayton and Hedgepeth would travel together to Biafra (now known as Nigeria) to document the Biafran Civil War. Working with the victims of genocide in Africa and poverty in America took its toll on Clayton, his daughter says.

"It was really hard for him to walk into the homes of these people who were starving to death, and you have to leave and go to the next one," she says. "And when he got back from Biafra, he said he went into the hotel in New York and cried."

What stands out to Hedgepeth about Clayton's body of work is the sense of compassion that shines through. "I really have thought of him in many ways, in terms of his concern for other people, as being like Atticus Finch."

"His experience documenting starvation in the South and in Africa put things into perspective," adds Jennie Clayton. "People were people to my dad. His coverage of the country music world shows his ability to capture the real person behind the stardom."

Clayton, who was born in Etowah, Tennessee in 1934, learned his trade while working as a medical photographer in the Navy in the 1950s, arriving in Nashville in 1965 after a stint in art school.

When Clayton remarried in the early '70s, he went to live in Atlanta, and at that point had five children to look after. Though he still shot album covers from time to time, most of his work during this period involved jobs for advertising agencies.

"There wasn't money to be made then doing the things [like photojournalism] his heart wanted to do," Jennie Clayton says. "I never felt like he resented it, though."

A production company out of Atlanta is currently working on a documentary about Clayton, which is slated to film in 2017. "Al's pictures captured the dark fringes of the American South in a harsh, not-to-be-ignored light," says Katy Powers, a producer with Pogo Pictures. "And there's a bigger story behind the hundreds of thousands of photos that have never even been seen."

"Most importantly," adds Steve Colby, who is directing the documentary, "like Al's work, the film will be visually disruptive and is meant to provoke action." ★

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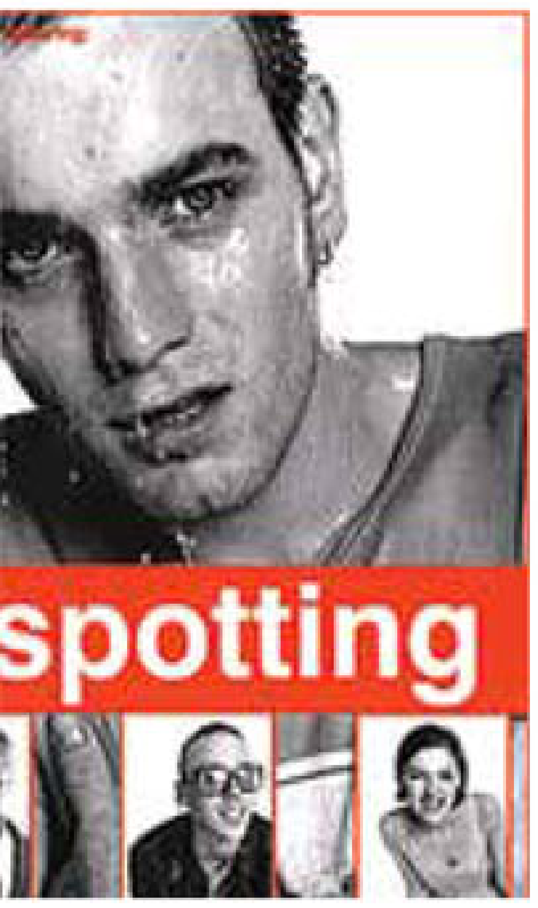

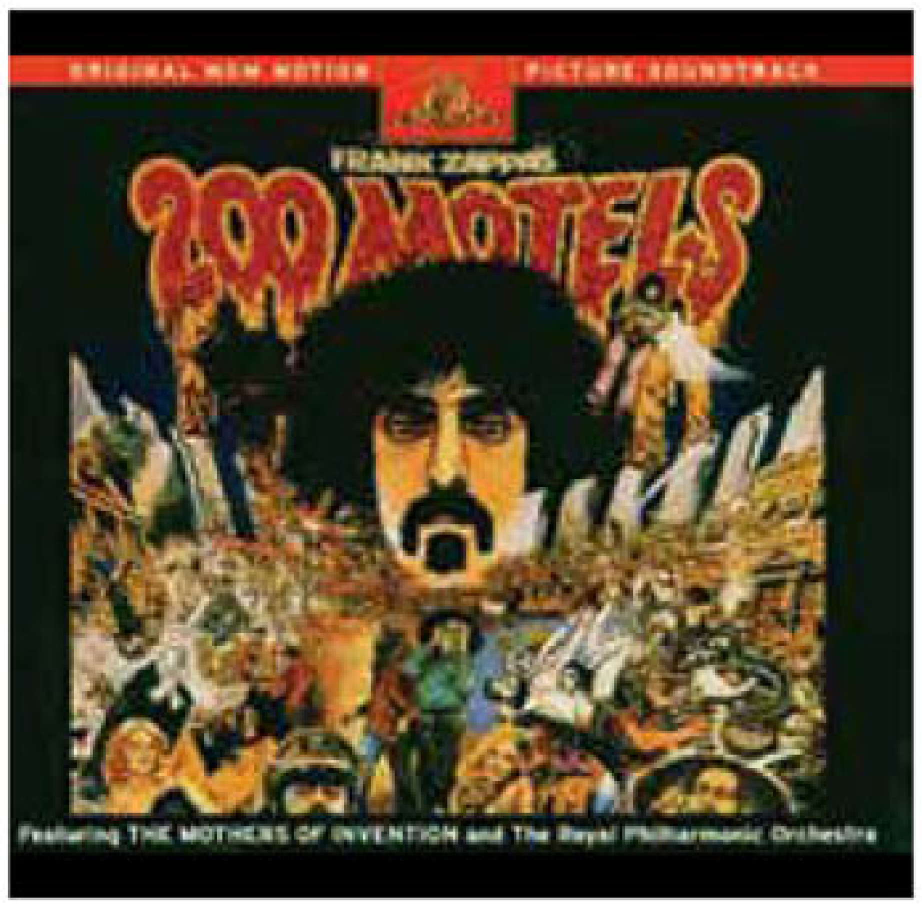

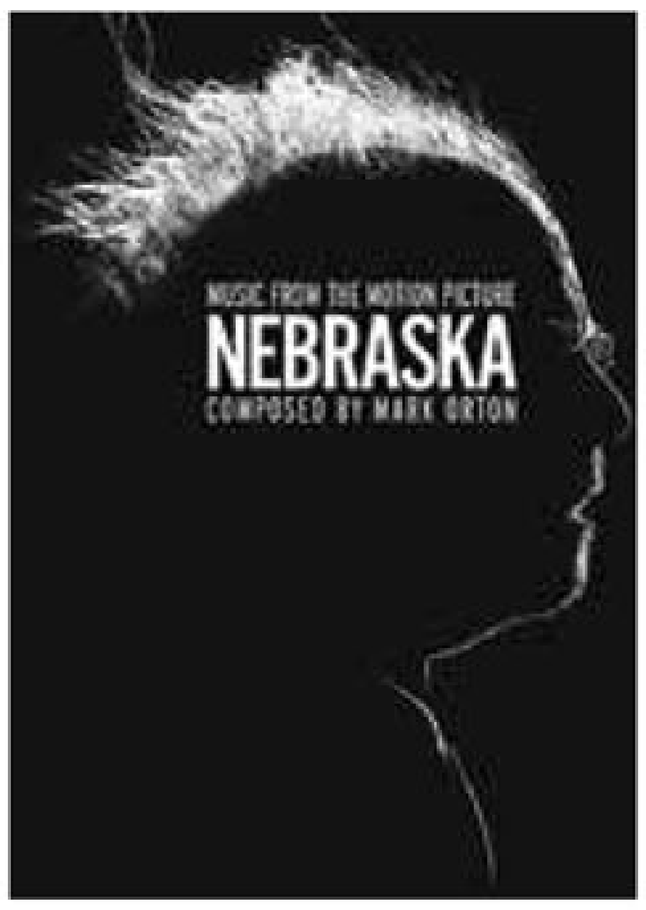

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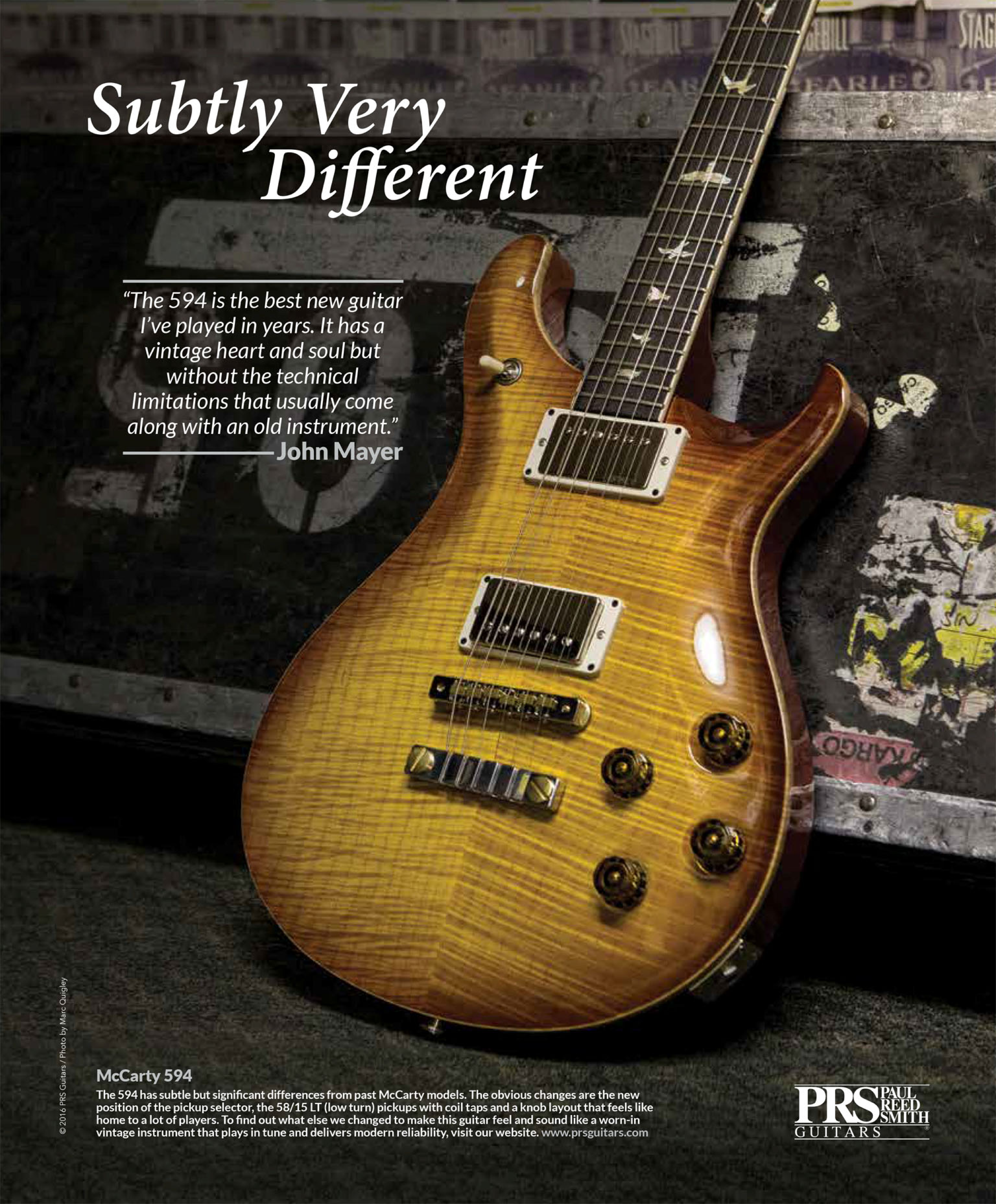
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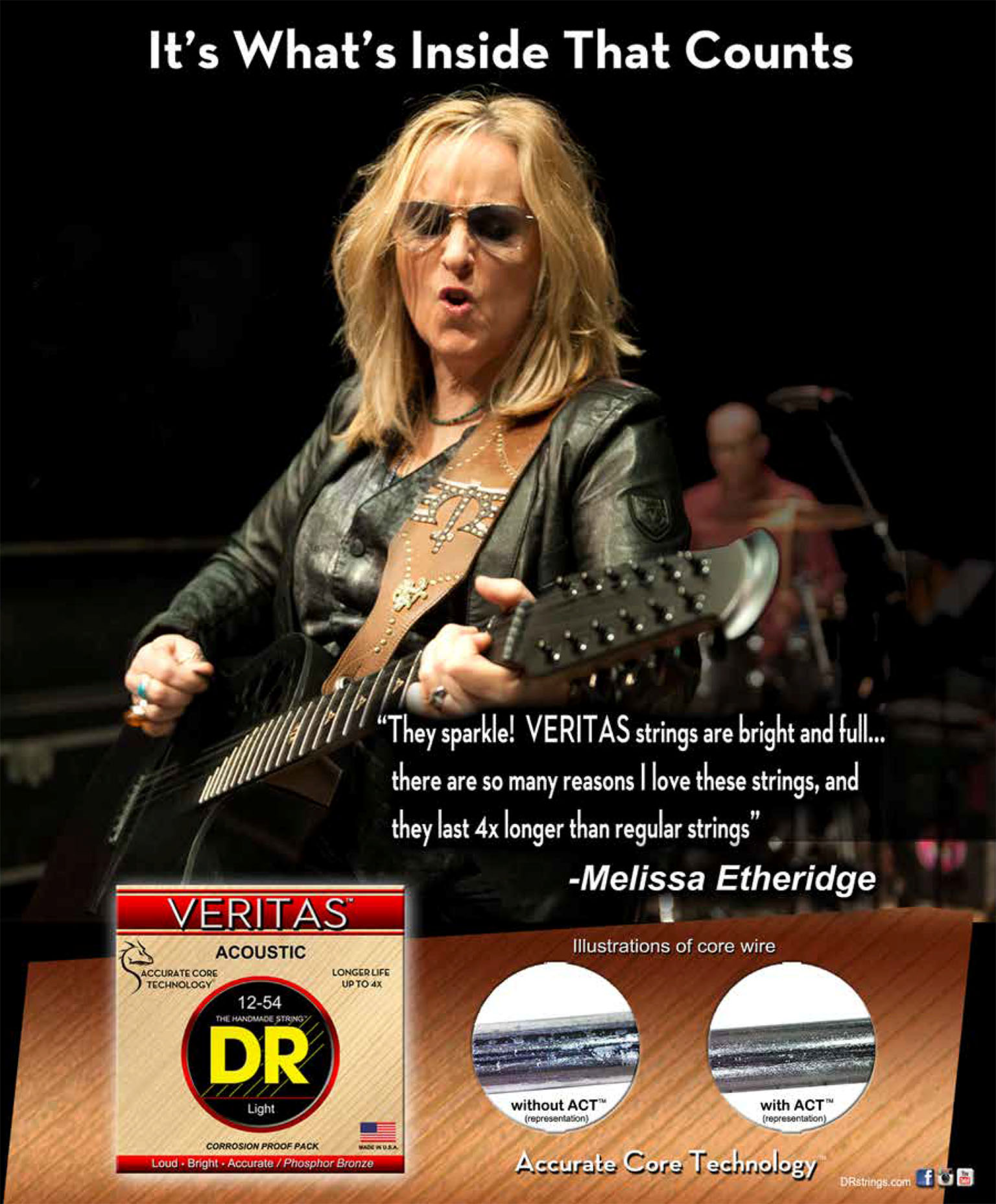

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MARGARET GLASPY

BORN AT THE RIGHT TIME

BY EMILY MAXWELL

Since mentions of Margaret Glaspy's songwriting prowess first started popping up in the beginning of 2016, the 27-year-old New Yorker, alt-rocker and critical darling has rapidly transformed into one of the contemporary music world's greatest assets in the battle to bring guitar-driven music back into the popular sphere. If rock and roll still has a chance, Glaspy is likely to play a hand in reviving it.

The positive attention has been a long time coming for the California-born singer-songwriter, who's had her sights set on becoming a performing artist since she first picked up a guitar about 10 years ago. As a child, she grew up in a musical family and learned to play the fiddle, but didn't try her hand at writing her own material until her late teens. And when she did, it stuck.

"I just love it, I love writing songs," says Glaspy. "I like that it's so multifaceted. There's just always something new to be had."

Like many artists who circle the fishbowl of the DIY world — which Glaspy got her start in during a stint as a student at Berklee in Boston — she was able to round up enough home equipment to start self-recording her songs, but not necessarily in a way she was satisfied with. "I always released EPs, little tiny small bodies of work, that I was excited about, but I didn't have the resources to do it exactly the way I wanted to," she says. As she worked toward writing a full album, Glaspy had an idea in mind of how she wanted it to sound and flow in a live setting — one that would enable her to perform completely on her own, just girl and guitar — so she shaped the record around it.

"I wanted to be able to play all the songs solo and have them stand on their own two feet in that way, so that started to make me play guitar in a certain way since I was having to play the bass parts and play lead at the same time," she says. "It kind of pushed me guitar playing-wise, and the songs didn't really have any extra fat on them in terms of just hoping to be pretty functional."

It was only after she joined up with ATO that she had the means to execute the musical vision she'd been gunning for; she had previously recorded the songs that comprise her debut album twice independently — once on her iPad and a second time in her New York apartment — before an offer from the label gave her the opportunity to re-record the songs professionally.

"I was finally able to produce this album and display them the way I think they should be displayed, so the record is something I'm pretty proud of, just because I feel like I finally had the chance to execute all the things that were going on in my head," says Glaspy.

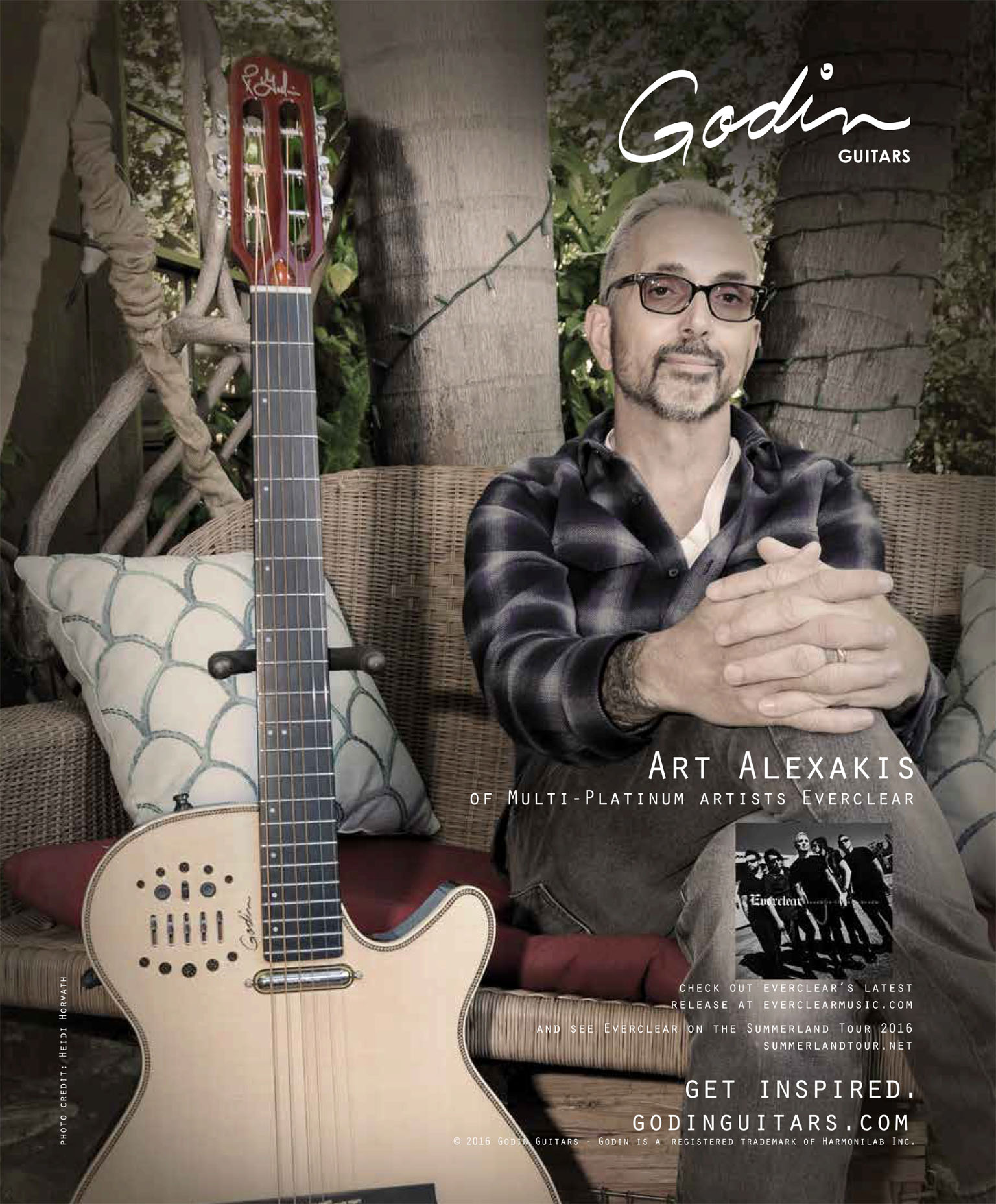
The final result was *Emotions And Math*, a powerhouse of a debut that received an uncommonly high level of critical acclaim from institutions across the world. In some places, *Emotions And Math* feels like a coming-of-age record; several tracks, like "Anthony," "No Matter Who" and "Memory Street," were written when Glaspy was in her early 20s and still carry the sharp, heavy, emotional bite of early post-adolescence. In others, Glaspy approaches love and relationships from behind a thick emotional callous, wearing wisdom and indifference instead of her heart on her sleeve. Either way, the poetic nature of her lyricism is constantly present, likely due to her exposure to poetry at a young age.

"I was fascinated by all this dark poetry as a little girl."

"My mom read a lot of Robert Service poems to me — the guy who wrote 'The Spell of the Yukon' — and I was really into Edgar Allen Poe. It was always kind of funny because I was fascinated by all this dark poetry as a little girl."

While there can be a lot of pressure that comes along with being a young writer on the brink of stardom, Glaspy has taken that pressure and warped it into something positive, choosing to use it as a tool of encouragement rather than a harbinger of negativity and stress.

"Being a performing songwriter, there's this thing where you feel like the Olympics or something — you've got to try to sing your best, play guitar your best, write your best, perform your best, and I like that there's so many different things that you have to try to be good at, because it never gets old," says Glaspy. "There's always something you can improve on." ★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DORI FREEMAN

BLUE VIRGINIA BLUES

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

One of the utopian promises of the internet was that music would be democratized, that independent artists would be able to receive instantaneous worldwide audiences without having to rely on major label marketing and carefully coordinated publicity campaigns. We've long since learned that promise, by and large, has proven false, but every now and then it delivers, providing artists who otherwise may never have been heard with widespread fan-bases.

Dori Freeman, a 25-year-old singer and songwriter hailing from Galax, Virginia, is one of those artists. In February, Freeman released her self-titled label debut and immediately began garnering rave reviews from everyone who managed to get their hands on the album.

"East Nashville feels tapped out, and Austin was done many years ago," wrote the alternative country publication *Saving Country Music*. "The best music happening right now you're likely to never hear, unless you're one of the lucky ones to stumble upon a local artist with world-class talent, an artist like Dori Freeman."

Freeman has been utterly surprised by the acclaim she's received from the album, which was released on the small Washington, D.C. label Free Dirt Records. "I didn't go into the album with expectations," she says, calling from home in Galax. "I just wanted to put it out and see how it did, and I've been certainly surprised and thrilled and flattered that it's received the reception it's gotten."

Dori Freeman is deserving of every bit of its praise. With influences that range from gospel to jazz to girl-group pop to '50s country, Freeman delivers her original compositions with a calm confidence and sharp delivery. Her voice, which croons, warbles, moans, belts and whispers from one song to the next, is understated, powerful without ever having to rely on cheap theatrics. Her songs, which on the surface face outward at sloppy decisions and failed relationships but ultimately point inward — at guilt, insecurity, confusion, and regret — are case studies in expert pop songwriting. "How am I supposed to go on loving?" she asks in the trad-country gem "Go On Lovin.'" "When you left me feeling like I don't know how."

The album draws its influences, most specifically, from the four-part harmonies of the Mills Brothers and the jazzy stylings of Peggy Lee, two artists that Freeman listened to most intently when writing her breakthrough LP. Those influences are deeply ingrained in the record's arrangements, which draw from jazz and R&B every bit as gracefully as country and folk.

Dori Freeman grew up in Galax, a musical stronghold with a rich history of traditional music in small-town Appalachia. Galax is perhaps best known as the home of the country's oldest and biggest annual Fiddle Convention, and both Dori's father, Scott Freeman, and grandfather, pencil artist Willard Gayheart, are well-established local musicians with a long history in the region.

But as much as has been made of her traditional Appalachian roots, Freeman also had an archetypal American musical upbringing for a kid coming of age around the turn of the century. Like most kids, Freeman grew up listening to Top 40 radio. The first cassette she bought with her own money was Britney Spears' 1999 debut. As a preteen Freeman and her friends were avid fans of Warped Tour-era emo, and she later began to refine her tastes as a teenager when she discovered singer-songwriters like Linda Ronstadt and Nanci Griffith.

All the while, Freeman was of course seeping up local influences from her family and local music community, and in 2011 she self-released her traditional-leaning debut *Porchlight*. But one can hear Freeman's wide-ranging childhood influences in the sturdy songcraft and impeccable sense of pop melody on her latest album.

"I am really proud to be where I'm from," Freeman says. "Even though my music and songwriting is not bluegrass or old time, and you may not hear any of that in there, it was a big influence growing up and it's where I got my start." Freeman has not minded the constant attention and interest surrounding her Appalachian roots. "I understand why people are curious," she says. "It's a part of America that not a lot of people hear that much about, so people are naturally drawn to Appalachia, because it's mysterious and they romanticize it a little bit."

On stage, Freeman lays bare her roots most plainly. At a recent set in a stuffy downtown Manhattan venue, Freeman transformed the stage into something of a familial back porch gathering as she covered Hank Williams hits and sang her favorite song written by her grandfather, a humorous a cappella tune called "Ern and Zori's Sneakin' Bitin' Dog."

"It's important for me to bring those things to my live performances," she says. "A lot of these stories are things most people are never going to hear about otherwise." ★

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NATURAL CHILD

GROW YOUR OWN

BY SEAN L. MALONEY

Maturity in rock and roll is a complicated thing. On the one hand, it can be an indicator of the slow, sad slide into irrelevance, a beacon indicating that the well of ideas and excitement is running dry. On the other hand, maturity just means that the jokes are sharper, the drinks stronger and the songs meatier, beatier and bouncier than ever before.

Maturity can take a third path, too, one where musicians neither burn out nor fade away, but just keep on chooglin', a little wearier, but also a little bit wiser. In the best-case scenario, maturity in musicians means a willingness to stretch themselves past the limits that have been set socially, culturally and musically. It is a phenomenon that runs counter to our *live fast, die young* rock and roll mythos, but one that has bequeathed us some of the artform's greatest moments.

It is also the phenomenon that defines *Okey Dokey*, the new album from Nashville's Natural Child.

"I think a lot of people are bored with your clichéd mature," bass player Wes Traylor tells *American Songwriter*. "There's a lot of mature music out there, going back and listening to things like the Eagles' solo albums. All that music is mature, I guess, but our generation has a different place that they're going in their late 20s, early 30s and 40s that doesn't have anything to do with Don Henley's 'End Of The Innocence' and shit, you know."

The better comparison, at least in terms of Natural Child and *Okey Dokey*, might be Henley's Eagles compatriot Joe Walsh. Both started in scuzzy, fuzzy garage bands, carving out a name for themselves one raucous party at time, Natural Child's 2009 debut EP being one of the defining documents in Nashville's nascent garage-punk scene.

Their Infinity Cat cassette *Body Snatchers* is a biker-psych tour de force. Both Natty C and Walsh's James Gang hit the road as hard-rockin' trios, building loyal cults of fans with their hard-partyin', rhythm-driven singalongs, 2010's *1971* a snottier, lo-fi analogue to the heavy grooves of James Gang's *Rides Again*.

2012's *For The Love Of The Game* and *Hard In Heaven* find the band doubling down on their sharp, sarcastic wit and Southern swagger. Like *Barnstorm*-era Walsh, we see the band expanding their palette of tonal colors, drawing from a broader range of tempos and textures. Here we witness a band becoming comfortable with their own abilities, developing a looseness that lets each song glide from your speakers straight to your brain.

By the time Natural Child hits its country-rock phase – ostensibly "Let The Good Times Roll," the weed-eating police run-in that closes *Heaven* – they are a limber, liquid outfit that flows through soul and psychedelia with ease. 2014's *Dance With Wolves* is as earthy as it is cosmic, the songwriting a bleary and bemusing take on life in the fast lane.

Which brings us up to now, 2016, and the band's latest, *Okey Dokey*, a first for the band's own Natural Child Records. "End Of The Innocence" it is not. No, in this protracted, beleaguered example, Natural Child have just completed their *But Seriously, Folks*. It's an album rife with humor, like the ribbing given to Facebook-era New Agers on "Transcendental Meditation" and the conspiracy-theorizing "NSA Blues," complete with riffs that just have to be played on air guitar.

"This one was a little bit slower, more spread out of a process," says Traylor. "Writing all of the previous records we had written at practice, every day in our shed, almost in order. Like *there's another one*. This one the process was a little bit different, we wrote a little bit more on our own. People have long-distance girlfriends and this was the first time since we'd started that we'd been sorta spread out.

"The road has always been great. But we've taken more time off [the road] this year than ever before, just for different reasons. This summer we've been writing a lot because we got a new practice space. We finally moved out of the shed in Seth's back yard, into a warehouse space with some good buddies."

The distance didn't dim the vibes, though, instead giving the songs room to breathe and the band room to wander around their soundscapes. When the band switches gears from boogie-woogie casanovas – "Juanita," "Benny's Here" – to rock-flute slingin', space-truckin' jam-gods ("Outta Sight," "It's A Shame"), they deliver on all the drug-punk promises they made while bashing out garage rock on Nashville's house show circuit. It's mature but it is an all-together seedier version of the concept. *Okey Dokey* is adult debauchery of Walshian proportions.

"We're just rock and roll, loud and sort of abrasive," Traylor chuckles. "We don't jam, really. We expand – how bout that? We don't jam, we expand." ★

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RORCEY CAROLL

THE HARD WAY

BY MARISSA MOSS

If singer-songwriter Rorey Carroll ever finds herself hungry for material, all she'd have to do is turn to her own life: from her self-inflicted homelessness, to her six months on the Appalachian trail at 20 years old, to getting convicted for transporting marijuana — 27 pounds of it, to be exact. But her second album, *Love Is An Outlaw*, isn't some kind of badge of honor touting her storied, sometimes slightly sordid past. Instead, it's a diverse palate of life, love and hard-learned lessons; full of empty rooms and emptier hearts, with Carroll's voice filling each and every void with its perfectly ragged nuance and dead-honest lyricism. She's got a story, all right, but she's more interested in the stories we all share together.

"I guess I have always learned the hard way," Carroll says about her rather unconventional life — right now, she calls an RV home, parked in an alleyway in East Nashville, and this is probably about as "settled" as one can expect her to get. "I knew when I was a kid that I was different. Going out and moving around the way I did taught me a lot about myself, and where I need to be."

Much of how Carroll has fulfilled that need has been by choice — raised by a middle class family in suburban Chicago, she knew that she had to push herself to exist — somehow, some way — outside the norm, even if that meant essentially becoming homeless. It was her dad who dropped her off at the base of the Appalachian trail: it took her more than half a year to complete it, with Carroll sleeping in a hammock and writing poetry in her journal along the way. She also toted along a backpacker guitar, using it to learn chords — at the end of the journey, only the instrument, not Carroll, was too beat up to keep playing. For her, comfort would have been the creative kiss of death.

Before landing in East Nashville, Carroll lived in Humboldt, Colorado, shuttling around weed until she was caught and arrested (a first offender, she served less than a week behind bars); in Vince Herman of Leftover Salmon's yard, and in Asheville, North Carolina, where she first started to go to open mic nights and develop an inner circle of fellow kindred songwriters. Once she moved to Music City, she finally found a place that felt like home — though living in an RV means she doesn't exactly have to put down roots anywhere, which is how she plans to keep it. "As soon as I got there, songs started flowing out like a fountain," she says of her side of the Cumberland River.

"I knew when I was a kid that I was different."

It's certainly helped Carroll to feel like she finally found the right geographic location when she captured the unwavering support of one of the town's unofficial mascots — for the offbeat artists, not the industry executives: Todd Snider, original East Nashville troubadour and lord of the train song, who took a fast and furious liking to her music. He took her on tour both for his solo slots and with Hard Working Americans, eventually signing on to not only help her rework *Love Is An Outlaw*, but to release it. Most people are lucky to find a mentor along the way, but Carroll found that and more in Snider.

"I'm blown away," she says of Snider's support. "My natural self-doubting self doesn't believe I deserve it. In a lot of ways, I'm blown away he would even consider me an opener, let alone help me put out a record. And realizing now that it's actually all happening — I'm getting choked up just talking about — well, it's been really, really important."

Carroll will open for Snider when he plays his upcoming 50th birthday show at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium this October — but, despite both of their penchants toward embracing the unpredictable, life backstage is relatively tame. "We smoke a lot of weed, we watch a lot of music videos on YouTube and talk about songwriting," she says. Snider gave up drinking recently, so, Carroll jokes: "I feel like I am the entertainment in a lot of ways."

Despite her unconventional past and Snider pedigree, she was still hesitant to use the word "outlaw" as the name of her album — "Love Is An Outlaw" is a slow-burning, acoustic number that, in many ways, epitomizes what Carroll is all about, with its sparse arrangement and frank, daring metaphors. "I don't really fit into the category of outlaw country," Carroll says, "but then I had a friend of mine say, 'If anyone is an outlaw, it's you.'" Certainly only an outlaw can lead a rebel life but create songs relatable to those who have suffered broken hearts, not just broken laws.

"It's not the deepest record, it's not the shiniest record," she says, "but it's my stuff, and it's what I have to give." ★

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AMANDA SHIRES

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING

BY KATIE CHOW

Texas-bred and Tennessee-based, with half her life spent on the road, home has meant a lot of things to Amanda Shires. On her latest album *My Piece Of Land*, the singer/songwriter/violinist stakes her claim on uncharted territory.

On first listen, her new songs are noticeably pared down from 2013's *Down Fell The Doves*, with instrumentation kept to a minimum on tracks like album opener "The Way It Dimmed" and "Harmless."

"On the *Down Fell The Doves* record, I kind of enforced my will on it and was more into trying different things and was more experimental," Shires says. "By the time I got into the studio with Dave Cobb, I had worked with him before and understood how he worked, and he likes to bring in the songs without demos so none of us know them very well. It keeps you from being married to things. If you practice the songs out and play them out, then they become kind of set. If you bring them to Dave and you work on them together, you stay more true to what the center of the song is."

Shires previously worked with the producer on her husband Jason Isbell's albums *Southeastern* and *Something More Than Free*, as well as a pair of covers the Americana power couple released as the *Sea Songs* EP. On her own material, paring things back puts her evocative vocals – and words – on full display.

Shires' striking, detail-oriented writing can't be confined to just one medium; she's currently finishing an MFA in creative writing at Sewanee. The collection of poems that she'll be submitting as her thesis will include lyrics to songs that didn't make it onto *My Piece Of Land*.

"Songwriting and poetry, they're such different animals," Shires says. "You can learn things that would also apply. I just feel that when I'm editing my songs now, I feel more strongly about my word choices. Even with prepositions, it's like, 'No, not exactly that one.' It's a little bit tedious, but I think that when you're writing, even really tiny, small things can open a song up to be tighter. It can make your ideas more clear, that what you're presenting is tighter and cleaner and more precise."

My Piece Of Land is particularly striking in capturing a brief but powerful time of productivity for Shires, who started writing the album last July while seven months pregnant and finished the bulk of recording the next month, just a few days before giving birth. It's an intimate portrait of the artist on the brink of a major life change, isolated while Isbell was still on the road and smothered by the relentless Southern summer heat.

"In the middle of it, I didn't see the end of it," Shires says. "I was like, 'Is this what my life's become? Am I just stuck here at the house?' It turns out that's not true, you end up having a baby and life continues on. You think a lot of crazy things while you're pregnant, you get anxieties about your life and it could be anything, really. The pregnant mind is a crazy mind. It was strange, it was really strange."

Her daughter, now a year old, stands to inherit a unique time capsule of Shires' life as she processed a future of balancing touring and parenthood.

"I haven't spent a whole lot of time apart from her," she says of her baby. "But it's good for us both, because I want to be someone where when she grows up, she can think, 'Oh, I can have a child and have a career and still have a good life.'"

After years of marriage and touring, Shires and Isbell make a fine team on much more than parenting. The two co-wrote "Pale Fire" and album centerpiece "My Love/The Storm," the couple's first full collaborations together.

"We've been married almost five years, and when we got together, we'd write on separate sides of the house," she says. "It's kind of like being in a candy store – you know you could write with him or you could write by yourself, but we were sort of saving it for later. You don't want to eat all of the candy at once."

Even without a writing credit, Isbell's presence is perhaps most potently felt on the bracing album closer "You Are My Home," from which *My Piece Of Land* takes its title.

"I've found that home is the people you surround yourself with," Shires says. "The house you live in can be your home, or your tent or whatever, but when that idea came up, I was just thinking, 'It doesn't matter where I live with my husband, because no matter where we go, we're having a good time and we're together.' So for me, home isn't in our house or home isn't on the road, because when we're separated, it sure doesn't feel like home in the house. To me, home is with my person, and he's my person."

There is nothing abstract about the track. It's just a pure, powerful expression of her love for her husband, punctuated by urgent violin stabs and a searing guitar solo.

"I try to get as personal as I can," Shires says. "I feel like as time goes on, I gain new experiences and things to talk about, and I hope that people can connect with that. And if not, maybe they'd just like to be friends and hang out." ★

(this page) Aaron Lee Tasjan. Photo by Curtis Wayne Millard (opposite) Ruby Boots. Photo by Rachael Barrett

LIVES OF THE PARTY

Eight Exciting Acts To Catch At This Year's AmericanaFest

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

FOR THIS YEAR'S 17th ANNUAL AMERICANAFEST, artists from all over the country will descend upon Nashville for six days of live music in September. This year's lineup has tons of big name attractions, from solo heavyweights John Prine and Lee Ann Womack to high-profile singing duos like Shawn Colvin & Steve Earle and Billy Bragg & Joe Henry, to tried-and-true veteran roots bands like the Bottle Rockets, the Indigo Girls, and the Handsome Family.

"Anything and everything can fit under the [Americana] umbrella," says Kaia Kater, who'll be performing at this year's festival. "It can be plugged in, unplugged, a capella, full band, no band, no rhythm, full rhythm. I've always been a little puzzled by the genre, but that's what makes it so fluid and malleable."

With nearly 200 acts on the 6-day bill, it can be nearly impossible to pick and choose between each day's countless showcases and performances. So for this year's AmericanaFest, *American Songwriter* decided to profile a few of the best and brightest rising artists who will be performing throughout the week.

AARON LEE TASJAN

Thirty-year-old Aaron Lee Tasjan has already lived several musical lives: as the guitarist of glam rock outfit Semi Precious Weapons; as the fill-in lead guitarist for the reincarnated New York Dolls; and, most recently, as a roots singer-songwriter who made splashes with last year's "E.N.S.A.A.T" (East Nashville Song About A Train), his razor-sharp critique, aimed equally at himself and his peers, of the burgeoning East Nashville musical community ("The kids in this town don't have a clue/ They're as white as the collar that they've painted blue," he sings in the opening couplet).

This October, Tasjan will be releasing *Silver Tears*, his second solo album that expands on the acoustic instrumentation of his debut with rich production flourishes that nod to Roy Orbison and The Traveling Wilburys. The primary songwriting influences, however — John Prine, Tom Petty, Guy Clark — remain the same. Tasjan fell hard for Prine as a teenager and has been deeply influenced by the songwriter's uncanny combination of complexity, melody, depth and humor ever since.

Tasjan sees the Americana music community as a useful way to group like-minded artists in an era where consumers are increasingly being given too many options to choose from. "You've got to have some sort of foothold for people to get on board with what you do," he says. "At the end of the day, people need a way to relate to you as an artist."

RUBY BOOTS

Ever since Bex Chilcott, who goes by Ruby Boots, released *Solitude*, her full-length debut last year, the Perth-based singer has experienced several "bucket list moments." Chilcott has opened for Kris Kristofferson and toured with artists like Nikki Lane, Shovels & Rope and Shakey Graves, introducing her blend of lush, melodic country-folk to audiences throughout the United States as well as her native Australia. Chilcott grew up adoring Madonna as a child and, after falling hard for grunge as a young teenager, her life was forever changed when she first heard three records as a 16 year old: Janis Joplin's *Pearl*, Bob Dylan's *Desire* and Joan Baez's *Greatest Hits*.

Chilcott began writing songs during long stretches of alone time living out at sea as a pearl farmer in Western Australia, and within a couple of years had devoted herself to music full-time. Chilcott, who is already writing material for a follow-up record, finds herself at home in the Americana community, a term that's just starting to catch on back

in Australia. "So many genre meanings have been skewed over time and represent something vastly different to what they meant 40 years ago," Chilcott says. "It's important to have a genre and more so, a community, where artists that write within a range of roots-based genres can live."

MOLLY PARDEN

For the last few years, Molly Parden has established herself as one of the most in-demand backup vocalists in Nashville, earning gigs singing and playing guitar for artists like Andrew Combs, Erin Rae, and Sam Outlaw. "I try to let my voice match the artist I'm singing with," she says. "I try to metaphorically wrap my voice around theirs so it sounds like one voice."

But Parden is also a commanding singer-songwriter in her own right, having just released *With Me In The Summer* in July. The four song EP, which includes the arresting single "Kentucky, I," marks Parden's first release since her 2011 debut *Time Is Medicine*. Parden moved to Nashville three years ago from Atlanta, where she began garnering acclaim for her work with Matthew Perryman Jones. "I literally just tweeted at him and was like, 'Can I open for you?" Parden says of her first encounter with Jones. "He just responded, 'Yeah you should totally play.'"

Parden, who says she's "not the type of songwriter who just churns stuff out all the time," spends time crafting her atmospheric folk-rock, drawing influences from inspirations like Radiohead, War on Drugs and Kathleen Edwards. She displays her omnivorous tastes on Instagram, where she can be found covering everyone from Mario to Kate Bush to Toby Keith. With her mix of surging folk-rock craftsmanship and tender balladry on her latest release, Parden is destined to break out at AmericanaFest.

RYAN BEAVER

Texas-bred singer Ryan Beaver has resided in Nashville for three years after moving to town from Austin. Earlier this year, Beaver released his third album *Rx*, which blends Beaver's traditional country roots with his more rock-based approach on highlights like "Dark" and "Kristofferson," an ode to Beaver's hero that he says is about "anybody who's ever moved to town to chase a dream."

That blend of music reflects Beaver's musical appetites growing up in small-town Texas, where he listened to everything from early Jimmy Buffett to Jackson Browne and Bob Dylan to '70s country stalwarts like Willie and Waylon. As such, Beaver has developed an impressive versa-

(this page) Molly Parden. Photo by Kelsey Cherry (opposite, top) Lydia Loveless. Photo by Laura Partain (opposite, bottom) Kaia Kater. Photo by Polina Mourzova

tility in both roots rock and classic country circles; he's one of the only artists to both be playing 2016's CMA Fest and AmericanaFest. "It can be tough for fans to get into your music or for music business folks to understand you if you've got some gray and your music isn't completely black and white," Beaver says of his straddling of the country/Americana worlds. "But you've got to be yourself. I'm never going to be just one thing. You can be a watered down version of somebody else, but the moment you are completely you, nobody can touch that."

KAIA KATER

Earlier this year, Canadian singer-songwriter Kaia Kater released her second album, *Nine Pin*, a moving collection of originals that feature the traditional Appalachian sounds and stylings that Kater has mastered and modernized after spending several years studying and performing mountain music in West Virginia. But with an adventurous sonic palette that includes muted trumpets, electric guitar, and Moog synthesizer basslines, Kater has made one of the most daring, inventive traditional records in recent years, at a time when Appalachian music is experiencing a revival. As Chris Bartos, Kater's producer, put it when he first heard the songs, "This won't be a strict old-time record."

Growing up in Toronto, Kater was exposed to a wide range of music from her mother, who ran the Winnipeg and Ottawa Folk Festivals, and her father, who introduced Kater to rap and reggae music at an early age. "I'd be just as likely to listen to Beres Hammond as I would Joni Mitchell," she says. Nowdays, Kater draws on everything from jazz to R&B to hip-hop to old-time mountain music to fellow Canadian singer-songwriter Amelia Curran to the neo-traditionalist folk of Gillian Welch for inspiration.

Though she feels that "roots genres are a little overburdened" by arbitrary sonic distinctions and boundaries, Kater is grateful Americana provides a home for music with styles as flexible and hard to define as her own. "I grew up around a lot of old-time music," she says, "and every player I meet has a different idea of what fits and what doesn't."

LYDIA LOVELESS

For her highly anticipated fourth album *Real*, Lydia Loveless decided to focus more on involving her band with the arrangements and in-studio production. "My band are all really great musicians who pour their heart and soul into this music, so it's cool to involve them more and have something else to focus on other than yourself," says Loveless.

After the success of her 2014 breakthrough record *Somewhere Else*, Loveless found herself spending most of the last several years on tour, where she wrote a good portion of the album. "Sitting in a van all day, if I don't at least write a poem or something, I should have no business calling myself a songwriter," she says.

You can hear that sense of heightened collaboration on highlights like the New-Wave strutting "Heaven," which Loveless describes as "if the Smiths and Prince had a baby," and "European," a stomping rocker with lush arrangements and layered guitars. Though *Real* is the most rock and pop sounding record Loveless has ever released, she still feels quite at home in the extended community of Americana. To her, the word simply means "average American Joe" music. With her new collection of songs full of sloppy regrets, sweaty desires and heartfelt declarations, Loveless' latest album, her finest to date, is sure to fit right in.

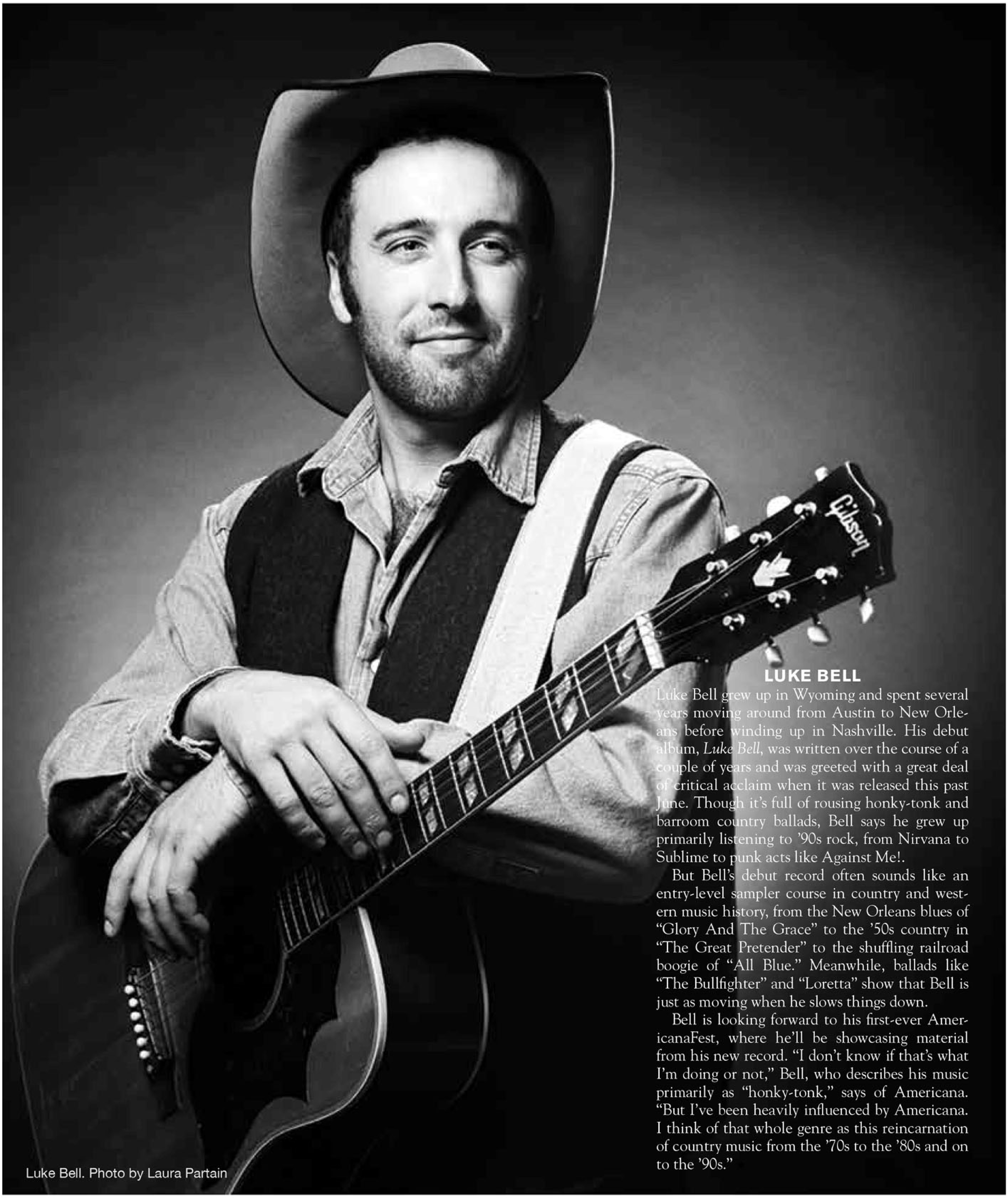
SAMMY BRUE

Fifteen-year-old Sammy Brue may be one of the youngest acts performing at AmericanaFest, but with several EPs and a brand new deal with roots juggernaut New West Records under his belt, he has quite the resume for a newcomer who was not yet born when *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was released. The first time Brue played AmericanaFest, he was 13 years old and drove 25 hours to play a 15-minute set that ended up being one of the most important gigs of his career.

Brue recently moved with his parents to the Nashville area from Utah. This coming year, he'll be fully focused on prepping his debut LP, which he's currently in the midst of writing. "I have a huge range of songs, some are super fast blues-picking songs and some are just songs with really good hooks," he says.

One of Brue's best early songs is "East Nashville," a post-gentrification modern spin on the long history of romantic musical depictions of Music City. The song features the impressive blues finger-picking that Brue picked up from his hero and mentor Justin Townes Earle, who has given Brue some choice advice on making it in the music business. "He really doesn't want me to do drugs," says Brue.

Sammy Brue. Photo by Daren Searcy



Luke Bell. Photo by Laura Partain

LUKE BELL

Luke Bell grew up in Wyoming and spent several years moving around from Austin to New Orleans before winding up in Nashville. His debut album, *Luke Bell*, was written over the course of a couple of years and was greeted with a great deal of critical acclaim when it was released this past June. Though it's full of rousing honky-tonk and barroom country ballads, Bell says he grew up primarily listening to '90s rock, from Nirvana to Sublime to punk acts like Against Me!.

But Bell's debut record often sounds like an entry-level sampler course in country and western music history, from the New Orleans blues of "Glory And The Grace" to the '50s country in "The Great Pretender" to the shuffling railroad boogie of "All Blue." Meanwhile, ballads like "The Bullfighter" and "Loretta" show that Bell is just as moving when he slows things down.

Bell is looking forward to his first-ever AmericanaFest, where he'll be showcasing material from his new record. "I don't know if that's what I'm doing or not," Bell, who describes his music primarily as "honky-tonk," says of Americana. "But I've been heavily influenced by Americana. I think of that whole genre as this reincarnation of country music from the '70s to the '80s and on to the '90s."

ST. PAUL AND THE BROKEN BONES
TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

BY ANDREW LEAHEY | PHOTO BY DAVID McCLISTER

left to right: Chad Fisher, Allen Branstetter, Jason Mingledorff, Browan Lollar, Paul Janeway, Al Gamble, Andrew Lee, Jesse Phillips

IT'S A QUIET WEEKDAY IN BIRMINGHAM, and Paul Janeway — back home after nearly a month in Europe, where St. Paul and the Broken Bones have spent the past three summers on tour — is resting his voice.

"After every show, I feel like I got hit by a truck," he says in a buttery Alabama drawl. "It's an all-day recovery process. It's a bit easier to keep my voice in shape in Europe, though, because let's be honest — they know how to make tea over there."

Back in May 2014, when the guys headed overseas for the first time, Janeway's accent was a constant reminder that the Broken Bones — a group of amped-up Bible Belters, firing twin barrels of throwback R&B and brass-blasted soul to audiences who were either confused, enthralled or a mix of both — were strangers in a strange land. They looked like accountants and sounded like the Dap-Kings. At the helm was Janeway, fists clenched, eyes shut, howling songs about heartache in a voice that was bigger than Big Ben. The spectacle took some getting used to, but Europe quickly embraced the band. This June, St. Paul and the Broken Bones played a triumphant set at Glastonbury, proof that the outsiders have officially found a home away from home.

It was during one of their many tours that Janeway and bass player Jesse Phillips began jotting down ideas for the band's new album, *Sea Noise*. They'd played nearly 500 shows in support of the Broken Bones' debut, *Half The City*, traveling across half the globe in the process. While they were gone, America took a nosedive into one of the most racially-divided periods this side of the Civil Rights era. Heady and heartfelt, *Sea Noise* takes a hard look at the band's southern identity, tackling everything from politics to gender norms in the process.

"You start to get more perspective than you had before, when you were just sitting in Alabama," Janeway says of the band's eye-opening trips from city to city. "You start seeing things differently. A lot of people who're from where we're from, their vision can be a little narrow. They say, 'This is the way it is.' We tried to twist that mentality with this record. We dealt with the dark corners that you encounter in a place like Alabama."

Last year, between back-to-back weekend appearances at Coachella, the guys rented a house in the San Ber-

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nardino Valley National Park. They were looking for someplace secluded — a spot where they could block the distractions of the road and, in Janeway's words, "find the songs." Working with the rough blueprints of new tunes that Janeway and Phillips had already sketched out, St. Paul and the Broken Bones — their ranks newly expanded to eight members, with Jason Mingledorff and Chad Fisher joining Allen Branstetter in the horn section — built a new sound that nodded to the past while still pushing ahead.

"We didn't want to do another version of *Half The City*," the singer says. "People called us a retro band when we released that album, and I don't think that was an unfair description. We were heavily influenced by the old stuff. We still love that music, but we also love Kendrick Lamar. We're very interested in what's happening now. If we tried to make another record like *Half The City*, that would have been us telling our audience, 'This is all we have to offer,' and that just wouldn't be an honest thing to say."

Additional songwriting sessions took place back home in Birmingham, and the band eventually decamped to Nashville, where they recorded the bulk of *Sea Of Noise* with producer Paul Butler. They took their time, further distancing themselves from *Half The City* — which had been tracked live, back when Janeway was still working a part-time gig as a bank teller — by spending as long as eight hours in search of the right drum tone. Some songs were recorded together, with the band working as a simultaneous unit; others were tracked part by part, person by person, instrument by instrument. Lester Snell, a Stax session musician who once played piano for Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers, was drafted to write string arrangements, and the Tennessee Mass Choir was hired to add thickly-stacked harmonies to "All I Want." The choir singers also appear on "Crumbling Light Posts," a recurring song snippet that pops up three times throughout the album.

"There's a great Winston Churchill quote, where he's talking about England during the war," Janeway explains. "He calls England 'a crumbling lighthouse in a sea of darkness,' and I thought that was a really interesting concept. We're all trying to do the right thing — trying to be this light in the world — but our lives have become so filled with noise that we're finding it hard to just have real experiences anymore. You can go to a concert now, and everyone's trying to watch the show through a cell phone. We were touring though Brussels awhile back, and I got to go look at this painting I'd always wanted to see — "The Death Of Marat" — and there were so many people taking pictures. It's like you couldn't just have a moment with it. There's this sea of noise going on. That's a common theme throughout the record, and 'Crumbing Light Posts' is the glue that makes it an album, rather than just a bunch of separate songs."

For Broken Bones fans expecting more tunes about loneliness and heartbreak, *Sea Of Noise* doesn't offer much in the way of familiarity. It reaches beyond those subjects, touching down in the otherworldly terrain of David Bowie, Prince and Sly Stone. "I'll Be Your Woman," with its gender-bending promise of love and protection, echoes the Purple One's "If I Was Your Girlfriend," while "Midnight On Earth" — a greasy slab of falsetto-heavy funk — occupies the middle ground between *There's a Riot Goin' On* and a '70s porn soundtrack.

"It's about having a relationship with a female alien," Janeway says of "Midnight." "She's able to turn your vision around, and you can look at the world in a very different way. It's a fun-ass song, sort of like a sci-fi Family Stone thing. To me, the spectacular part of it is the ending. The horns don't play throughout the song, but they come in at the end, and it just builds. It was great to let them shine. It's really orchestral."

With more than a half-dozen members in the band these days, *Sea Of Noise* spreads its spotlight around. Whether it's Al Gamble's mix of upright piano and church organ in "Burning Home" or Andrew Lee's percussive punch in "All I Ever Wonder," every instrument gets a chance to shine. The Broken Bones haven't sounded this much like a genuine band before. The songs feel full without sounding busy, and Janeway promises that the group's reigning philosophy in the studio — "play less" — extended to him, as well.

Let's be fair, though: the frontman's voice is still the Broken Bones' most reliable showstopper, packing power and poignancy in equal doses. It's a voice he discovered as a teen in church, where weekly services provided one of the only chances for an otherwise sheltered kid to let his freak flag fly. It's still easy to hear plenty of gospel influence in Janeway's holy-roller holler, but there's more nuance this time around, too. The soft moments are softer, the loud moments louder. If *Half The City* introduced his voice, then *Sea Of Noise* refines it. It delivers plenty of dramatic payoffs, too, with nearly every track building its way toward something Janeway calls "a 'ta- da' moment," where he unleashes the full power of what he can do.

"The greatest singers on the planet know how to give and take," he says. "They just know their voice. And I'm still learning mine. This is the second time I've made a record, so I'm still learning how it all works. I do know, though, that if you just 'go for it' all the time without any variation, you're going to sound like a one-trick pony."

A slot on the Rolling Stones' 2015 arena tour helped open his eyes, bringing him face to face with a vocalist who's built a career not on singing prettily, but on singing with attitude.

"I didn't grow up listening to them," Janeway admits of the Stones, who cherry-picked St. Paul and the Broken Bones to join them for sold-out gigs in Atlanta and Buffalo. "I couldn't. It was only gospel music and a little bit of soul stuff in my house. The only way I heard a Rolling Stones song was if it was in a commercial, so I'm not one of those people who listened to *Exile* growing up. Instead, I started listening when I was 18 or 19, and one of my biggest hang-ups was always getting over Mick Jagger's voice. Then I realized that his voice just fits the music. You can't imagine anyone else singing those songs but him. It's a give and take. Bob Dylan is the same way. I wouldn't put him in a vocal class — he's not technically proficient, really — but it's the perfect voice for the music he's playing."

With *Sea Of Noise* hitting stores September 9, St. Paul and the Broken Bones are staying on the road, where audiences have already heard a handful of the new songs live. The guys are scheduled to tally around 150 shows this year. That's a bit of a decrease from 2014, when they logged more than 200 gigs in support of *Half The City*. The Broken Bones aren't looking to spend more time at home, though; they're simply looking to refine. *Sea Of Noise* is a big step in that direction, showing a band that's still on a rise, but now following a more personalized path. ★

LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL OLSEN

BY MARISSA MOSS | PHOTO BY AMANDA MARSALIS

ANGEL OLSEN ISN'T IN HIDING — she's just looking for a little break from human interaction. "I feel a little covert because I don't want to tell a bunch of people I'm here," she says, calling from Chicago, where she lived for a stint before landing in the beautiful, haute-hippie mountain town of Asheville, North Carolina. She's been staying at her bassist Emily Elhaj's house while she's been in the city, and made sure to wear her sunglasses the other day while going for a jog. "I realized as I was running that I was passing some of my friends' places. And I thought, 'Oh no. What if they see me?' I just want to look at stuff instead of talking to people."

You could say that Olsen wanted some things to disappear in plain sight when she released the teaser for her third album, *My Woman*, this past summer. It's a clip from the LP's rather haunting opener, "Intern," sung by Olsen — except not really. Wearing a silver glitter wig that reappears again in the video for "Shut Up Kiss Me," it's her and not her all at once. The bangs: they're short and familiar to her usual crop, her face fair but not pallid. It's not a disguise, but a way to trick us into looking and listening differently.

Olsen sounds different on "Intern," too. The slow, solemn strum of the guitar heard on her 2014 LP, *Burn Your Fire For No Witness*, has been replaced by slow, solemn synth — recognizable yet morphed, just like Olsen in that silver headpiece, with her penetrating vocal still front and center. "It's super misleading on purpose, which is always fun," says Olsen. Indeed, *My Woman* isn't entirely synth-dominated at all, but Olsen likes to tease and taunt. "I was trying to show the front side of the album by doing that, but I knew what people would say. 'When is Angel gonna be folk again? I miss the country-folk Angel!' But these are lyric-heavy songs."

Of course, there was never really a "country" Angel Olsen to begin with, but since releasing her first full-length LP, *Half Way Home*, in 2012, it's something that's tagged along for whatever reason — and a comparison to Joni Mitchell or any other strummin' female of the folk variety — because that's just how the collective reflex seems to work when someone sees a woman holding a guitar. Things escalated when she released the single "Hi-Five" off of *Burn Your Fire*, which opens with this line: "I feel so lonesome I could cry," evoking the title of one of Hank Williams' most famous tunes.

"I eternally regretted picking that as a single," says Olsen. "You make these choices and make an album, and I'm still processing it. With me, I kept getting all of these projections of what happened with the last record. I had no idea it was coming, and it was a weird success for me. But when I see a projected image of me as a cartoon with bangs playing country music, what is this perception? Is it going to keep being like that?"

Burn Your Fire was a critical darling, pinning the St. Louis, Missouri–born Olsen to the top of many best-of lists. That reception was welcome for Olsen, but, at the same time, she felt pinned down by those projections of the indie-queen, alt-country chanteuse with bangs, eternally dodging inquiries about her upbringing, mostly about her adoptive parents (who are in their 70s and 80s) and trying to focus the narrative on how she might have evolved as a result of those circumstances. There were lots of questions from the media about things that didn't matter: lots of digging into parts of her life only lived briefly, like a short stint as a member of Bonnie 'Prince' Billy's band. Then there was the attention from fashion magazines and blogs, one of which described her as a "warbling beauty [with] the bangs that launched a thousand haircuts." Even *Vogue* made note of her "enviably cool pixie

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bangs." Olsen had to take a step back.

"I had to take two or three months off and reflect on what happened," she says. "I just hung out in Asheville and went hiking and did normal things. Made salads for people. I didn't really talk about music. I didn't go to very many shows. I wanted to not hate it all, I wanted to see what made me interested and not be tired of the cartoon projection of myself." Though the praise was appreciated, she felt crushed by how her evolving narrative sometimes overshadowed, or at least oversimplified, the work.

It took the sojourn in Asheville to refocus, and time back out on the road to re-inspire her creative muse — but that wasn't the goal. On tour, she tried to enjoy the cities she was visiting, rekindle old friendships, focus on the joy of the live show. When she returned to North Carolina, she ended up quickly writing five or six of the songs that would become *My Woman*, listening to records like Brian Eno and Donny Hathaway, experimenting with new sounds and techniques. "I had no idea what was going to happen," she says. "But I knew I was going to continue with several different aesthetics."

What happened, exactly, was *My Woman*, with a title that's meant to challenge listeners not to jump to any conclusions. It's as direct as it is obscure: is it a feminist ode? Is it about herself? Other females in her life? That's not a question she wants anything but the music to answer. "The concept by default happened," she explains. "Titling it *My Woman* leads you to believe all these things." So do songs like "Sister" and "Woman," two softer-paced, seven-minute plus tracks on the B-side of the record, which is how she intends it to be digested, with "Intern" and "Shut Up Kiss Me" belonging to the "A."

What Olsen doesn't love is having to always explain and deconstruct every last nuance of every song or meaning — at one point, back in February, she tweeted this: "From this point on all future interviews will be answered by friend, hand puppet or drawing." Today, it's Olsen herself on the phone, luckily — the puppet is something she came up with jokingly while in the studio with her new producer, Justin Raisen, known for his work on albums from Charli XCX, Sky Ferreira and Santigold (i.e. women who are not, for the record, ever compared to country chanteuses or Joni Mitchell or Patsy Cline). They knew that the title and LP in general would incite some questions — so why not just whip out a hand puppet to answer the most egregious ones? "Sometimes the hand puppet will go up if you ask a rude pointed question," she says, and she's heard them all before. "It's a blessing and a curse to have to talk about [my music]."

Raisen is notably more pop-centric than her previous producer, John Congleton (Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, War on Drugs, St. Vincent), though what he brings is more kinetic than genre-specific. "He's a very different kind of breed of person," Olsen says of Raisen. "Naturally, he's crazy like a fox, an energetic dude who wears different color Adidas tracksuits." They recorded the album live to tape in Los Angeles at Vox Studios, pushing Olsen's vocal capabilities to every possible corner: from big, haunting howls to chill-inducing whispers, accented by everything from piano to synth to her signature crunches of guitar. And if there's one thing it's not, that's country-folk.

"There is something really soft and nice about a girl who plays acoustic and sings Leonard Cohen-esque songs," she says. This will be her second album with a full band in tow, and she doesn't anticipate reverting back anytime soon. "But it's not something you can do album after album."

What the bulk of *My Woman* is about is relationships — with lovers, friends, parents, herself. "I'm always obsessed with this idea of writing a song about an expectation or idea of someone that got totally destroyed or changed. I've seen that in my early songs. Who is my closest friend? Who are the people who are going to follow me through this life? It's good to have goals and believe in people, but to have these expectations instead of working on your own happiness is a big deal." She laughs softly, adding, "I'm not trying to do a self-help book."

Olsen admits to spending too much time thinking about symbols in those relationships, something that can be both a negative and a positive when applied to other people, or even to songwriting. Maybe especially songwriting. Mostly, she has to remind herself, from time to time, that "not everything is a symbol." "It's a blessing, but it's also a bummer if you are thinking too deeply about something," she says.

Even so, she still ended up launching the album with a symbol of sorts: that silver wig. That vision of Olsen introduced in the video for "Intern" carries through the next for "Shut Up Kiss Me," with some of the same motifs, like the telephone she is seen chatting on in one and glancing at in the other. Olsen directed them both, and enjoyed toying with that preconceived notion of her as a pretty girl with bangs, plaintively strumming the guitar. "It was a fight to break down that stereotype," she says. It's not about hiding — rather, forcing people to step aside from whatever assumptions anyone may have made in the first place. "I'm not trying to be Sia, I'm not trying to be Grimes. I just want to get myself out of that character."

"Intern" itself is both in and out of character for Olsen — her disarming tone and assertive lyrics are fully intact, though pushed to seductive coos and shattering high notes — but that signature aggressive fuzz of guitar is replaced by dreamy synth lines. "Doesn't matter who you are or what you've done," she sings. "Still gotta wake up and be someone." It's a line that applies to interns, lovers, workers in the eternal grind and, of course, artists.

"You're never finished until you're not here anymore," she says of the song, and that lyric in particular. "Even after your death, people exploit you. There is something to be said about that line — we all have to wake up and do things, everybody has to keep going. And it's not easy sometimes."

That same girl appears in the video for "Shut Up Kiss Me" except, this time, she's off the phone and into the roller skating rink. The guitars are back too, and Olsen, is singing — well, demanding, actually — her lover to "Shut up, kiss me, hold me tight, everything will be alright." The woman on *My Woman*, Olsen or not, can be strong as hell without pretending to not crave the attention of a man. On the dissonant grunge of "Not Gonna Kill You," she's unapologetic, on "Sister," bravely vulnerable, and on "Woman," she's confined to femininity and well aware of its walls.

"I'd do anything to see it all, to see it all the way that you do," she sings. Olsen has had moments over the course of her career when she's felt the crush of being a woman in a male-dominated industry, beyond just the hyper-focus on her bangs. "In every day situations, there are moments when I feel like people are withholding information from me because of everything you grow up doing and absorbing as a lady," she says. "And there have been some moments in my career where people have said some things that got to me — someone saying something about, 'Oh, that guy doesn't want to play music with you, he wants to be with you.' And now, I just know to look out for it."

Olsen is always looking out, always aware: whether in her music, or on that jog back in Chicago. It's part of being a woman, and part of being her *Woman*, wig or no wig — hiding in plain sight from preconceived notions, and taking anyone who dares to hold them on a completely wild ride. ★

left to right: Matt Patton, Brad Morgan, Patterson Hood, Mike Cooley, Jay Gonzalez

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS DO AMERICA

Veteran Rockers Navigate Nation's Grand Funk

BY SEAN L. MALONEY | PHOTOS BY DANNY CLINCH

"MOST OF THESE PEOPLE BELIEVE that this was enshrined in the constitution to defend against a tyrannical government but most of these people are also defense hawks — they want America to swing the biggest military dick in the world."

Drive-By Trucker Mike Cooley is on the phone. It's a Friday morning and there's been another mass shooting. The internet is having a panic attack and cable news has a content-boner. It caps off a week of protest and turmoil, screaming and kicking. The continent is in the grip of drought as it enters its ninth month of record-breaking heat. It's 2016 and society seems to be fraying at the edges. America feels like it's about to tear itself apart. Race, class, religion are pushing 300 million people in 300 million different directions. It is Friday in America.

"If they had their way they would cut everything and give it to defense and then a little bit more," Cooley says. "So on one hand they believe they have to keep their guns to defend themselves against this tyrannical government while on the other hand ensuring that they don't stand a snowballs chance in hell of being successful. And this organization has them so brainwashed they can't see how ass-brained stupid that is."

Cooley's southern drawl and even demeanor underscore just how much thought he's put into all of this, his delivery more charming professor than firebrand rock singer. The band are preparing to release *American Band*, their 11th studio album and their most politically charged to date. *American Band* finds the Truckers firing on all cylinders, delivering one of the leanest, punchiest records of their two-decade long career. Bold and uncompromising, *American Band* is the Truckers-as-documentarians capturing and commenting on the Great American Fissure as it grows.

"I talked to Patterson the other day — read something, sent him a text — and said enough has happened since we mastered this that we could write this entire album again with completely different events. It just never stops."

****

It's Thursday in America. A couple of days have passed since any new horrifying violence has gripped the national consciousness. The day is still young and the nation still shaky from, well, everything. Rhetorical battles are playing out across lunch tables everywhere; mudslinging memes and manipulative videos are pouring into our newsfeeds nationwide. Families are fighting, old friends are unfriending as opinions become fighting words and fighting words are all we've got left, apparently. Disaster has not struck today. Or rather, has not struck yet today. It's Thursday afternoon, and Drive-By Trucker Patterson Hood is on the phone.

"Whatever you're doing you need to do it, but I've got to get back to my phone call, honey. I love ya, but I gotta get this done."

It's evident from the noise pouring through the phone that the Hood home has been invaded by neighborhood kids, like some scene out of a sitcom. It's in this moment that something becomes clear: as much as *American Band* is a political statement in the grand rock and roll tradition, it is also a document of parents worried about their future, trying to ensure a world that is safe and stronger and more equitable for their kids. When Hood describes his ancestral journey from the shores of Ireland to Ellis Island down through the Appalachians in "Ever South," it's not just self-congratulatory

genealogy. Hood is relaying that most important of reminders: that in America we are all immigrants and there is no place for xenophobia.

"The day that I wrote that 'What It Means' song, that guy had just landed that [space probe] on that comet, that had just happened and that's why it was in the song," Patterson says. "It's like, okay, we're capable of so much better than what we are doing. We can do that, we can do some really cool shit, why can't we quit shooting black boys that are walking down the street?

"Why can't we get past this 17th-century mentality? Can't we evolve a little quicker in that respect? That was kind of the point from which this record sprung from – we're capable of so much better. Can't we do a little better than Donald Trump? Does it have to be that bad? That's where Cooley and I were coming from in the writing part of this record."

It's a lesson that's easy to forget, but one that is essential to our mutual survival, the sort of lesson a dad should pass on to his sons and daughters. Which goes back to one of the larger motifs that makes *American Band* such a vital document – for all the fire within the lyrics, the tone of *American Band* is always fatherly, never paternalistic. Problems are identified, dissected and discussed, but, unlike so much of the political discourse in America circa 2016, there is no all-caps screaming, no meltdowns, no name-calling. (Okay, there's a little bit of name-calling, but Cooley is a master of the sly, southern zinger and it wouldn't be a DBT record without his quick-witted character sketches-cum-punchlines.) *American Band* is worried, *American Band* is scared, but above all *American Band* keeps its cool as society waves matches at the tinder pile.

"As curmudgeonly as I can come off sounding I'm really not that curmudgeonly," Hood says. "I'm a generally kind of optimistic guy – truly, in most ways – with a really dark, fatalistic, black sense of humor. It's my river that runs through it [*laughs*]. I'm no Pollyanna but I've certainly got an optimism – I do think the world is slowly, inch by inch, getting better. But for every two steps up there's a least a step back that occurs and that's maddening and frustrating.

"I grew up in Alabama, as anyone that's ever heard of us knows, during one of the darkest moments in time for our state. I grew up watching all of this, more aware than a kid should be about what my dad was doing and how that all kind of fell. I've used that as a source of such optimism and hope that we were turning a corner on this racial bullshit – not that racism was over but that we were turning a corner – and the last eight years has been pretty disappointing watching that. Now my yard has been invaded again."

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"No, I've never been worried about [offending listeners]," Cooley explains the next day, one rotation around the sun and one massacre later. "I think [listeners that would get offended] are in the minority. I think there have been people out there that have maybe missed the point, because a lot of these things have been in our material, they just have never been on the surface. They've never been right out there and as plainly spoken. They've always been part of a larger picture or part of a larger story in the context of a fictional character. I think there are folks that missed the point and maybe thought we had different leanings, so this is making it clear.

"I think people became fans because we didn't seem to care about whether or not anybody liked it, I think that was part of what drew people to it, so why stop now? [*laughs*] Honey, this is what you loved about me when we met. Why is it all of a sudden a problem?"

The same could be said of the music on *American Band*. All politics aside, the Truckers have delivered their tautest, most focused record yet, packed with thrilling riffs and clever melodies – it is exactly what we loved about them when we met. *American Band* is an album with a sense of purpose, a sense of pride, a sense of identity. It is not merely a collection of songs but a conversation with the audience, a colloquy between bass and drum, keys and guitar, singer and listener. The songs never wander, the band never loses the plot. After 20 years and 12 records – including last year's live *It's Great To Be Alive* – the band is sharper than ever, an all but unheard of feat in contemporary rock.

"In some ways it was easier than usual [to write], because I knew where I wanted to go," Cooley continues. "I want to be true to myself too. I always strive for empathy with those I may seem to disagree with or seem to be calling out. And I tried to do it with this, too, and not be so on the offensive, but attacking nonetheless."

Recorded in three days with David Barbe at Sound Emporium in Nashville, the *American Band* dates were originally slated as demo sessions, but lightning struck and the band, fresh off fall tour, scorched through their new set. *American Band* is a veteran outfit operating intuitively, trusting in each other and taking risks without breaking a sweat. It's daredevil professionalism, the kind of ballsy moves that people secure in their work can make. There's a sense of moral obligation behind "Darkened Flags" and "Kinky Hypocrites," a sense that it would be an abuse of that security not to speak against the injustices that flood our environment, flashed at us by screens both big and small.

When asked how he copes with the onslaught of bad news every day, Cooley responds: "I don't very well. I try to sometimes just ignore it, just not look and tell myself there's not a damn thing you can do at this point. Making this album is about all I can do, and it's something but it's more about getting it out of my system than hoping I can change anything."

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"Please, don't hit my car with an apple." Patterson Hood sounds exasperated. The neighborhood kids are back, horsing around, throwing apples at each other like good, all-American kids should. Hood's car is caught in the middle. It's like something out of a Garry Marshall two-camera sitcom. There is a resignation in Hood's voice that betrays a bit of sympathy for the rabble rouser in his front yard, pelting his car with metaphor-laden tree-fruit. "Excuse me y'all, can y'all please not throw an apple and hit my car. Thank you. Don't do that please."

The conversation turns back to music and Patterson Hood, rock and roller, reemerges. "That damn Radiohead record, it just kills me, the strings on that thing," Hood opines. "I've always respected strings but I've never gotten off on strings in the context of a rock record like I have on that record." He shares equal enthusiasm for Johnny Greenwood's soundtrack work – "*There Will Be Blood* is the best scored film of the last 20 years" – and his guitar work.

Hood talks about the new [Neko Case Trio], the Sam Beam record his wife and daughter introduced him to, PJ Harvey, David Bowie and "this dude named Kyle Kraft" that does "really cool Mott the Hoople, T Rex, glam stuff ... one of those voices." With each artist he names – Kendrick Lamar, Run the Jewels – Hood picks up more energy, his descriptions almost like a guitar vamp, building excitement with every note.

"The Kendrick record [*To Pimp A Butterfly*] was in heavy rotation from the moment it came out last year," Hood continues. "So during that time frame that [*American Band*] was being written, that was a lot of what I was listening to, over and over again. We don't sound anything like that but I can't help but hope that informed the record in a positive way."

"Politics has always been a part of our writing and our music and what we do and at the same time none of us wants to be soap box standers. And I still don't, I still want it to be ..." Hood hesitates. "We're not giving speeches, these are personal songs."

And therein lies the power of songs like "Surrender Under Pressure" and "Baggage" – these aren't statistics or scare quotes, they are stories about politics and the people that make them so tempestuous. Stories, and their innate humanity, are being lost in a stream of memes and gifs and heavily edited video clips. The songs on *American Band* – "Filthy and Fried," "Ramon Casiano," "Once They Banned Imagine" – are more than just position papers. Hood, Cooley and the crew capture the unvarnished character of America, circa 2016. It's complicated and often ugly, but it has the capacity for immense beauty if you know where to look.

"It's about the questioning, about the personal questioning and wondering what can I do? What can we do? What is the answer? I don't know the answer," Hood explains. "These are all real things, and I don't have an answer." ★

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

The Devil And The Details

HE WAS AN UNREPENTANT HELL-RAISER WITH A GIFT FOR POETIC STORYTELLING. AND HE CHANGED THE WAY SONGS WERE WRITTEN IN NASHVILLE.

BY GEOFFREY HIMES | PHOTOS BY AL CLAYTON

Bobby Bare, Sr. (left) and Kristofferson at Monument Studios in Nashville, circa 1970.

Kristofferson has a laugh between takes at Monument Studios.

ON AUGUST 26, 1970, Kris Kristofferson was unknown to almost anyone not in the habit of studying the writers' credits on country-music singles. Yet there he was on an island in the English Channel, on stage at the Isle of Wight Festival, facing down half a million European hippies who were loudly uninterested in what he was trying to do. With his dark brown bangs obscuring his right eye and his long hair curling over a brown suede jacket, he told the unruly crowd, "We're going to do two more in spite of anything except rifle fire." When that failed to get a reaction, he told his band, over his left shoulder, "I think they're going to shoot us."

He wasn't going to back down. He strummed his acoustic guitar and began "Me And Bobby McGee," a track from his debut album, *Kristofferson*, released just four months earlier. The song had been a modest country hit for Roger Miller the year before, but few in this crowd had ever heard the soon-to-be-famous refrain, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." That aphorism took on an ominous edge as packs of young men restlessly roamed between unsanctioned bonfires, yelling as they went. Finally, the always cantankerous Kristofferson stalked off stage mid-song, giving the crowd the finger as he went.

The songwriter turned 80 this summer, and he's now greeted by adulation nearly everywhere he goes. Sony Music has just released a 16-CD set, *The Complete Monument & Columbia Albums Collection*, as well as a three-CD/1 DVD set, *The Highwaymen Live*, early-'90s concert recordings of the supergroup featuring Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings. Kristofferson's own label, KK Records, has released the two-CD set *The Cedar Creek Sessions*, recent re-recordings of his older songs. The latter includes a duet with old pal Sheryl Crow on an obscure Cash tune, "The Loving Gift," that Kristofferson had never recorded.

In March, Kristofferson was saluted in a big concert at Nashville's Bridgestone Arena, featuring a version of the Highwaymen that included himself, Nelson, Shooter Jennings and Jamey Johnson. Just before Merle Haggard died in April, he asked Kristofferson to take his place on a tour with Nelson. In October, Kristofferson will be presented with the third annual Woody Guthrie Prize at Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa.

Having constructed an imposing body of work over the past half century, Kristofferson deserves the hero treatment today. But we shouldn't gloss over the controversies he sparked nor the obstacles he overcame. It's useful to remember a time when he was still fighting to be heard, when "Me And Bobby McGee" wasn't a campfire staple, when his landmark songs, deeply rooted in the country-music tradition while pushing the boundaries of that legacy, proved challenging to country and rock fans alike.

The story is usually told as one of Kristofferson defying Nashville's taboos against writing about non-married sex and non-alcoholic drugs. But breaking through such barriers requires more courage than talent, and Kristofferson's legacy lies not in the hundreds of mediocre songs about no-strings sex and marijuana on country radio today. His significance is based not on what he wrote about but on how he wrote about it. He became a role model for succeeding generations of country songwriters because he shrugged off decades of clichés to write about the real lives of country fans with startling detail. And from those details he drew maxims so full of irony that their meaning could never quite be pinned down.

> **"The songwriters my age and a little older who came to Nashville were following Kris."**
>
> **— Steve Earle**

"Yeah, they say he put the 'skin' in country music," says Steve Earle, "but that's missing the point. He was simply the first writer in Nashville with the literary chops to write about sex without it sounding stupid. Of course, a lot of other writers tried to follow in his footsteps and the results were predictable. They didn't understand that it was all about the poetics, the detail in the imagery. Quite simply, Kris was the first post-Dylan songwriter to land in Nashville rather than New York or L.A. The songwriters my age and a little older who came to Nashville were following Kris."

"In 1970 and '71 I was making a living playing the hits of the day in East Texas Holiday Inn lounges," recalls Rodney Crowell. "Kris's songs were a godsend. "Me And Bobby McGee" and "Help Me Make It Through The Night" were a mammoth relief from the likes of "Scotch And Soda" and "Joy To The World." I must have sung "Help Me Make It ..." 300 times. If I hadn't, I doubt I'd have written "Till I Gain Control Again." At the time, a wannabe artist like myself could feel pretty good about singing the words 'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose' to a bar full of traveling farm-supply salesmen. It was as close in that setting as you could get to 'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.'"

Two months after the Isle of Wight Festival, on October 3, Kristofferson found himself in friendlier territory: the Big Sur Folk Festival at the Monterey County Fairgrounds, where the pivotal Monterey Pop Festival had been held three years earlier. Folk fans, accustomed to Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Tim Hardin, were open to the raspy vocals and elliptical metaphors, even when Kristofferson dressed them up in hillbilly clothes. His full set from that day has been released for the first time as a bonus disc on the new *Complete Collection*, and Kristofferson sounds less combative and more generous on this version of "Me And Bobby McGee."

At Big Sur, you could hear the wonderful particulars of the verses, which described two bohemian hitchhikers with empty pockets and cheerful optimism. The narrator was "feeling nearly faded as my jeans," before a truck driver picked them up, and soon, "with them windshield wipers slapping time and Bobby clapping hands," they sang "every song that driver knew." You needed to hear these verse details to appreciate the refrain, for only in the context of the hitchhikers' happy-go-lucky poverty did the phrase "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" sound like hard-won wisdom rather than glib sentiment. And you needed the aphorism to make the details resonate beyond mere description.

That was Kristofferson's genius: to link specific imagery to universal catch-phrases — and to make those aphorisms too paradoxical for comfort. After all, what kind of freedom is it to be so poor that there's nothing left to lose? Yes, there's something liberating about traveling without obligations or

possessions, but what if you desire the freedom to find a home, as Bobby does in the last verse, or find a vocation, as the narrator apparently has? And isn't there always something left to lose? Doesn't the narrator regret losing Bobby in Salinas? Kristofferson would pursue the elusive essence of freedom for the rest of his career.

"I learned from Kris that you could write very specifically and with your own sense of poetry and have it be legitimate," Rosanne Cash says. "More and more specific is where I wanted to go, because of him. But his visceral imagery — the rooms, houses, bars, streets and all the little artifacts of life — was combined with his unexpected and sharp turns of phrase — all combined in loping melodies and tight rhyme schemes. He made the incredibly difficult seem easy. You never, ever got the feeling that he was self-conscious in his poetry or pretentious in his aphorisms."

Even as Kristofferson was battling the crowd at the Isle of Wight and wowing the audience at Monterey, he was enjoying one of the greatest songwriting streaks in country-music history. Earlier in 1970, his song "For The Good Times" had become a #1 country single for Ray Price and the Academy of Country Music's Song of the Year. Then Kristofferson's "Sunday Morning Coming Down" became a #1 country single for Johnny Cash and the Country Music Association's Song of the Year.

Next, Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through The Night" became a #1 country single for Sammi Smith and was later named the greatest country single of all time in the book *Heartaches By The Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles* by David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren. That same year other Kristofferson songs became top 10 country hits for Waylon Jennings ("The Taker"), Jerry Lee Lewis ("Once More With Feeling") and Bobby Bare ("Come Sundown"). That momentum continued into 1971 with top 40 country singles from Price, Bare, Lewis and Miller as well as a #13 R&B hit with Joe Simon's version of "Help Me Make It Through the Night."

"You never got the feeling he was self-conscious in his poetry or pretentious in his aphorisms."
— Rosanne Cash

But the big breakthrough was the version of "Me And Bobby McGee" recorded by Janis Joplin (Kristofferson's lover for a brief while) just before she died on the day after the Big Sur show. When the single was released in 1971, it topped the pop charts for two weeks. Monument Records cleverly re-released Kristofferson under a new title, *Me And Bobby McGee*, and the poor-selling debut soon became a hit — as did its follow-up, *The Silver Tongued Devil And I*. The 23 songs on those two albums contain the vast majority of the songs that Kristofferson is remembered for today. It was a bounty that seemed to come out of nowhere, but it had been gestating ever since the songwriter moved to Nashville in 1965.

He came because he had grown up on the records of Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. He came because wanted to be a writer, and some of the best writing being done in 1965 was on country-flavored rock and country-flavored folk records.

"When I grew up, country music wasn't popular with everybody," he told this magazine in 2013. "I was going to high school out in California and they all called it shit. But largely because of the attention that Dylan brought to it by his respect for Johnny Cash and his friendship with Johnny and the fact that he came here to Nashville and recorded, all of the sudden the young people who like rock and roll realized there was something good going on here."

He came because he had studied the poetry of William Blake as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University in England, and the most Blakean writer he could find in 1965 was Bob Dylan. He came because he really didn't want to settle down in the academic job he'd been promised at West Point after three years in the U.S. Army. His first wife was unhappy with the decision, and his mother disowned him.

"I always felt that I was going to be some kind of writer," Kristofferson told *The Guardian* in 2010. "I started writing a bunch of songs when I was over at Oxford." A comic pause. "I didn't know they were bad at the time … It cost me my first marriage, but I'm just grateful that I had the nerve to get out of the military."

He got a job as a janitor at Columbia Records' Nashville studio and was sweeping floors when Dylan recorded *Blonde On Blonde* there. He soon fell in with the crowd of songwriters that hung out at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge: Nelson, Miller, Bill Anderson, Hank Cochran. Tom T. Hall, Mickey Newbury, Tony Joe White, Billy Swan, Chris Gantry, John Hartford and Shel Silverstein. Several of them had penned hits for other singers, but Miller, with his #1 1964 hit "Dang Me," had proven that maybe they could sing their own songs.

"In general, we all just tried to knock each other out," Kristofferson told the *Nashville Scene* in 2003. "You tried to find a way to impress the other writers, to get some attention for what you were doing. We felt like we were fighting for respect — from each other, from Music Row, from the world at large … We'd go out roaring for days at a time. Just partying, playing music and singing songs to each other. I loved it. It just intoxicated me. My excuse was that if I didn't make it as a songwriter, I'd write a book about these people … We didn't write these things because we wanted to have hits; we wrote them because we were trying to write great songs."

Johnny Cash wasn't part of that gang, but he appreciated their efforts. He took a shine to Kristofferson, and brought the youngster out on stage for his first public performance at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival. The army-trained Kristofferson once landed a helicopter in the couple's backyard to give Cash a cassette of "Sunday Morning Coming Down." Cash maintained that he tossed the tape into the Cumberland River and told the songwriter to get off his property. Whatever happened that day, Cash did record the song, and it topped the country charts. He even defied the demands of television censors that he change the line, "On a Sunday morning sidewalk, I'm wishing, Lord, that I was stoned."

"I first became aware of Kris," says Rodney Crowell, "I think, during a televised country music award show when Johnny Cash's version of "Sunday Morning Coming Down" won Song of the Year. In a world where glitter and spangle was the predominant fashion, even for male artists, Kris looked like a Greenwich Village folkie. Though his hair was not yet long and his face was cleanly shaven, something about him evoked the image of the Poet."

"When I was 16, I bought a Johnny Cash tape at a truck stop and listened to 'Sunday Morning Coming Down,'" Hayes Carll remembers. "I had heard somewhere that Kris had written it and that he was a heavy hitter with an interesting backstory. That song was simultaneously so simple and profound, rough and poetic — it hit all the marks for what I loved in songwriting. A year later I heard "The

Pilgrim: Chapter 33," and I had an out-of-body experience. The hairs on my arm were standing up and it shot an electric current through my spine. It was the coolest thing I had ever heard. I knew in that moment that I wanted to be a songwriter."

The controversy over Cash singing "I was stoned," however, was nothing compared to the uproar over Sammi Smith asking a man who's clearly not her husband to "Help Me Make It Through The Night" on the #1 single of the same name. Suddenly we were no longer on the barstools, the front-porch rockers or the parlor cushions where so many country songs took place. Now we were in the bedroom and under the sheets, where country had never dared to go.

But once again, it wasn't what Kristofferson had written about but rather how he wrote about it that made the crucial difference. "Take the ribbon from my hair," Smith sang on the unforgettable first verse, "shake it loose and let it fall, laying softly upon my skin like the shadows on the wall." Anyone who had ever been under the sheets with someone else had to be shocked by the familiarity of that description — too shocked to stop listening. Kristofferson captured farewell sex on "For The Good Times," perfunctory sex on "Once More With Feeling" and fondly remembered sex on "Lovin' Her Was Easier."

"Kris was the first country music artist to intelligently articulate male vulnerability," says Crowell. "I think it's what made him a superstar. Women (and co-eds) loved it and so did the up-and-comers like me who dreamed of someday conjuring the kind of songs that would seduce co-eds — and, of course, women."

"He said the things very few people would say but in a way that everyone wished they could," adds Carll. "He made the complicated simple and the simple profound. He was a sensitive poet who could kick your ass but wasn't afraid to be vulnerable or speak from the heart."

Fred Foster, who owned Kristofferson's publishing company, Combine Music, was starting a record label called Monument Records, and he invited his star writer to become a recording artist. Kristofferson protested that he wasn't much of a singer. Foster didn't disagree but replied that Dylan had proven that a gifted writer could become a star without a conventional voice. If Kristofferson's singing was more like Leonard Cohen's than like Dylan's, so was his success. But that was enough to build an enduring career.

His ability to translate the felt experience of drinking, lovemaking, law-breaking and loneliness into song made him a magnetic figure for many folks. Filmmaker Dennis Hopper sought him out to star in *The Last Movie*. An obscure songwriter named John Prine sought him out as a mentor, and Kristofferson got Prine a record deal and wrote the liner notes for his debut.

At a later Big Sur Folk Festival, Joan Baez sang a duet with Kristofferson on Prine's "Hello In There," also included in *The Complete Collection*. Superstar Barbra Streisand invited him to co-star in her remake of *A Star Is Born*. Directors such as Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton, Todd Haynes, Sam Peckinpah and John Sayles cast him in movies.

An adventurer such as Kristofferson couldn't resist such opportunities, but the combination of touring (often with singer Rita Coolidge during their 1973-1980 marriage) and making movies prevented the single-minded devotion to songwriting he had enjoyed between 1965 and 1971. His third album, 1972's *Border Lord*, marked a definite drop-off, but later that same year he rebounded with *Jesus Was A Capricorn*, which included terrific songs such as "Nobody Wins," "Sugar Man" and "Why Me," the latter the only top 40 country single Kristofferson would ever enjoy as a solo artist.

He never stopped writing songs, though, and there were always a couple of good ones on every record. After his last album with Monument/Columbia in 1984, the wonderful duo/soundtrack album *Music From Songwriter*, he released albums for the Mercury, Justice, Oh Boy and New West labels. In this century, he has revealed different facets of his old songs, presenting them in new arrangements in concert and releasing his original songwriting demos.

In that vein is his new album, *The Cedar Creek Sessions*. Kristofferson had a few days off in Austin just before his 78th birthday in 2014, and he impulsively decided to re-record some of his old songs at the Cedar Creek studio there. He asked his longtime publicist/manager Tamara Saviano to produce the session, and she called in Nashville stalwart Shawn Camp (who had co-written with Saviano's other client Guy Clark and who now plays the Lester Flatt role in the Earls of Leicester) to co-produce. Camp assembled a lean, skillful quartet to give the arrangements lots of breathing room and led the band through 25 older songs that Kristofferson called out from the vocal booth.

"Bands have a way of overplaying and steering the ship into waters the artist might not want to go," Camp says. "So the band was sparse, and we let him do his thing. The arrangements on his original recordings were a lot bigger; they're great arrangements, but they covered up the real Kris. At the time, Nashville had never had any singer with a raspy voice like Kris, and they tried to sweeten it up with string sections and all kinds of harmony singers. I'm not knocking them; those early recordings evidently worked or we wouldn't be talking about him. But these new recordings are pure Kris."

"The songs have the tone of an old man looking back on his life rather than being a young man with many years ahead of him," says Saviano. "To me, they sound more reflective. A song like "To Beat The Devil" takes on new meaning when sung by an older but wiser man than a cocky young kid."

"I'd heard some of these songs all my life and had always loved them," Camp continues, "but waking up in the middle of a recording session, actually recording them with Kris, was pretty wild. I was struck by the years that he had lived in these songs, and the way the age in his voice brought more potency, more depth. He blew me away with his stamina and professionalism. He stood there in his old, rough-cut cowboy boots in front of his microphone and sang several takes of each of these songs all day and into the night. He never sat down once, and he never missed a word."

In many of these re-recorded songs, you can hear Kristofferson wrestling with a familiar theme: the paradoxical character of freedom. What was more important: freedom from or freedom to? The freedom from restriction or the freedom to gain the love and work you wanted? He had dealt with this explicitly in songs such as "Me And Bobby McGee," "The Broken Freedom Song" and "The Burden Of Freedom," and implicitly in a dozen more.

In the end, he leaned in the direction of the freedom to forge commitments over the freedom to cast them aside. He has been married to his third wife, Liz Meyers, since 1983, and they've raised five children together. He has made dozens of albums and appeared in dozens of movies. Again and again he has chosen the freedom to connect over the freedom to disconnect.

"I recommend following your heart," Kristofferson told *American Songwriter* in 2013. "If the whole world thinks you shouldn't be doing something that you truly believe you're supposed to be doing, you've got to do that. And that can alienate some people, but you just have to do what you feel like you were set down here to do." ★

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BONUS FEATURE

Kris Kristofferson joins Margo Price for a rendition of "Me And Bobby McGee" at Newport Folk Fest in July 2016

KRISTOFFERSON RETURNS
TO NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL

Kris Kristofferson made his first-ever stage performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1969 when Johnny Cash and June Carter brought him out during their set. Kristofferson hadn't been back to Newport since, and he wasn't scheduled this year either. But on a Saturday afternoon in late July, the leader of the Texas Gentlemen, a sextet of crackerjack session musicians, was welcoming the songwriter to their set as a surprise guest.

He looked good, tall and trim in a black T-shirt and a silver goatee, but he sounded a bit shaky at first. He sang clearly on "Sunday Morning Coming Down" and an abbreviated "Help Me Make It Through The Night," but his acoustic guitar picking was unsteady, and the band was hanging back tentatively.

But then he blew a strong harmonica intro to "Me And Bobby McGee," and the band perked up as if they too were singing "every song that driver knew." The young country singer Margo Price had come out to sing harmony, and after the final chorus, she started channeling Janis Joplin in a belt-it-out Texas blues soprano. Kristofferson broke into a huge grin, signaled for more solos from the now locked-in band and another "la-dee-la-dee-la" from Price. The crowd was on its feet shouting its approval.

Then he was gone. ★

Photo by Josh Wool

MICHAEL KIWANUKA

LOVE & HATE

(INTERSCOPE) ★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

IT'S UNLIKELY there will be a better, more daring opening track in 2016 than this disc's "Cold Little Heart." The extended 10-minute opus magnifies any previously held opinions of how talented U.K. singer-songwriter Michael Kiwanuka is based solely on his impressive 2012 debut. Here, teamed with producer Danger Mouse, he kicks off his two-years-in-the-making sophomore release with a deliberately paced, stunning, mind-expanding piece that includes strings, angelic female backing singers, George Harrison-influenced slide guitar and the kind of creative vision only the most gifted artists can summon.

Introducing the disc with this soon-to-be-classic sets the bar awfully high for the following tunes and 49 minutes. And while it's impossible to top it, Kiwanuka and Danger Mouse merge their visions to craft music of introspective yet commonly understood themes touching on loneliness, isolation and one's place in the world with an inspired combination of restraint and sumptuous drama.

From the reflective ballad "Rule The World" that adds gospel fervor, to "Father's Child" and the title track, Kiwanuka writes and sings with understated honesty and a sense of longing that keeps these lengthy pieces from feeling excessively long or bloated. On the contrary, the duo uses their sonic palette to overdub guitars, strings, piano and percussion with scalpel-like precision. There is even a potential single in the jaunty, relatively brief, mid-tempo "One More Night" with its funky bass line and a singalong melody that kicks in after the first spin.

By any measure, this is an audacious, startlingly mature and powerful album; the kind singer-songwriters aspire to, but seldom deliver. It's intimate and sprawling, personal and universal, affectionate and daring. So sit down in front of your largest speakers, turn up the volume, close your eyes and let *Love & Hate* envelop your senses while taking you on a journey to the sonic expanses of your mind. — HAL HOROWITZ

OKKERVIL RIVER

AWAY

(ATO) ★ ★ ★ ★

OKKERVIL RIVER'S EIGHTH ALBUM, *Away*, begins with an elegy. In fact, it's likely that more than a few listeners will find the opening track's title, "Okkervil River R.I.P.," a bit jarring. And in a sense, singer-songwriter Will Sheff is saying goodbye to a part of his life that's over. "They had some great songs/ Must have been a great time so long ago." It's nostalgic, mournful, hopeful and defeated all at once, a saga unto itself.

If *Away* begins with a death, however, the album that unfolds is about rebirth. Sheff revealed in an NPR interview that the circumstances surrounding the album were fraught with endings: Band members leaving, familiar faces in the industry disappearing and watching his grandfather die. Coming out the other end, Sheff sounds less angst-ridden and frayed than he has on past albums. His singing is softer and sweeter, the instrumentation more subdued and spacious. An immediate comparison that comes to mind is Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, though *Away* is by no means as expressive or adventurous. *Away* is, however, one of Okkervil River's prettiest records to date.

One of the things Sheff said about the record early on was that he was no longer as interested in writing rock songs, and on *Away*, very few of them are to be found on the tracklist. The closest is probably "The Industry," a folky mid-tempo number that feels lighthearted despite Sheff's own reflections on the Kafka-like labyrinth of the music business: "I thought that it was us against the world/ But now it's me against something so big and abstract that I can't tell what it is."

By closer "Days Spent Floating (In The HalfBetween)," Sheff & Co. have filled the canvas with so much color that the album has seemingly done a 180 from its elegaic opening. This isn't an album about death — it's about finding new life. — JEFF TERICH

LORI McKENNA
THE BIRD & THE RIFLE
(CN RECORDS/THIRTY TIGERS) ★ ★ ★

THERE'S A REASON DAVE COBB is currently Nashville's hottest producer. The Grammy-winner who helped turn Jason Isbell, Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson into household names has been making magic with a slew of great singer-songwriters. There's also a reason Lori McKenna, whose songwriting credits include megahits such as Little Big Town's "Girl Crush," Hunter Hayes' "I Want Crazy" and Tim McGraw's "Humble & Kind," is one of Music City's go-to song crafters. But when it came to making magic together, Cobb and McKenna somehow missed the trick.

Whether Cobb's intent was to mask McKenna's occasional vocal shortcomings or simply to make these songs sound big, the result is a tendency toward over-production, starting with way too much Mellotron use. Hard to fathom what inspired that, or the instrumental breaks on her rendition of "Humble & Kind" and the title tune, which swell to near-bursting, then drop off precipitously just in time to squeeze in the last verse or chorus.

The lyrics themselves range from touching and affecting to somewhat clichéd. A few sound as if they were plucked from Springsteen songs — or written for charts, not hearts. "We Were Cool," for example, contains these lines: "'Smells Like Teen Spirit' on a tape cassette/ Before we ever heard of the internet/ Redemption was a ragtop, all we needed was fuel/ Yeah man, we were cool." On "Old Men Young Women," co-written with Barry Dean and Luke Laird, she sings, "She's a past in a summer dress/ He's a ride in a red corvette."

The album certainly has some charms; the delivery on "Always Want You" is more delicate and nuanced, and "If Whiskey Were A Woman" contains lines of elegant brilliance. The stark honesty and gentle melancholy of "Wreck You" is also noteworthy. But it could be even stronger, like so many of these songs, if only it had less clutter.
— LYNNE MARGOLIS

JOHN PAUL WHITE
BEULAH
(SINGLE LOCK RECORDS) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

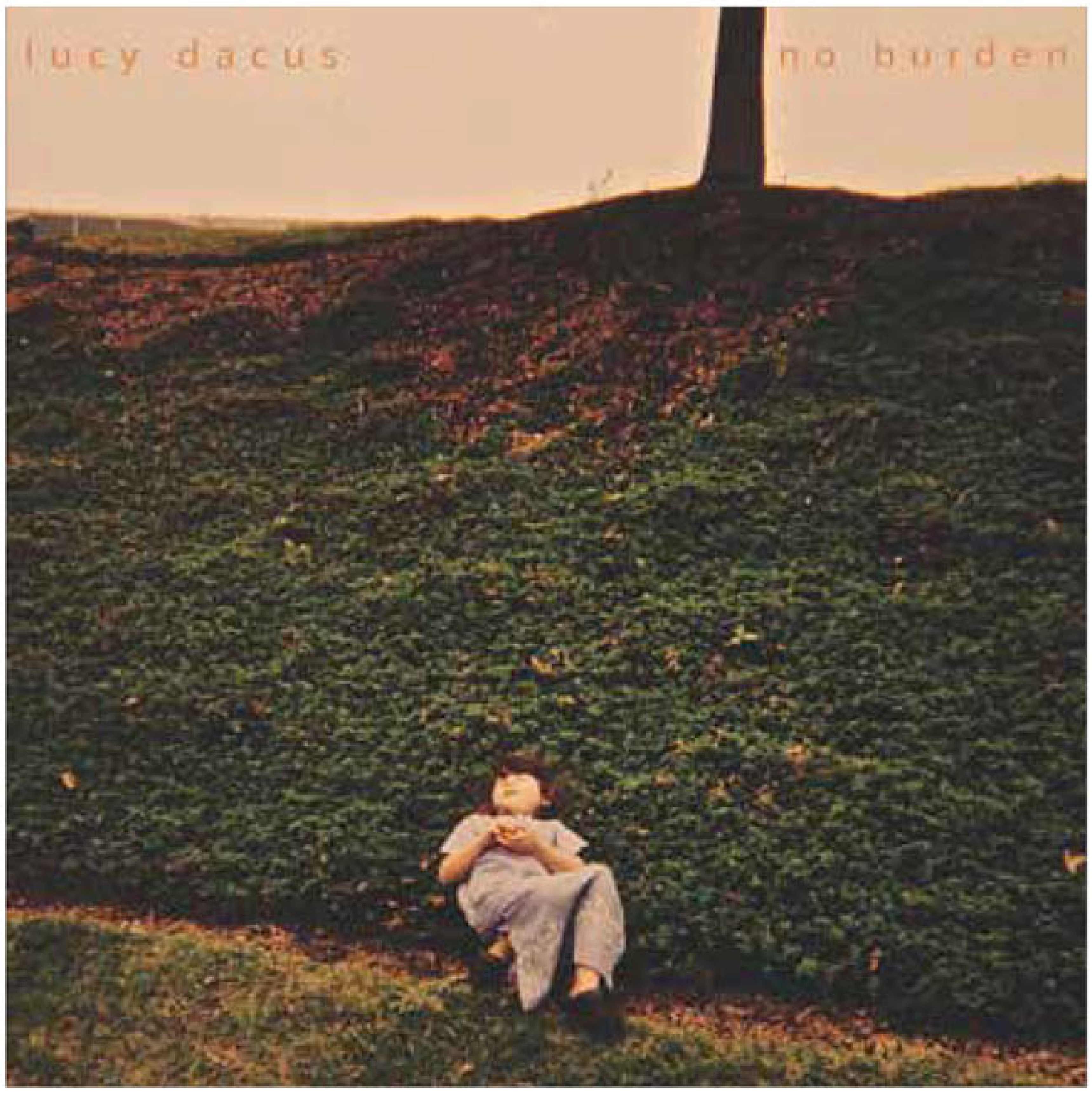
AS ONE HALF OF THE CIVIL WARS, John Paul White was one of the most visible folk singer-songwriters in the country for a few years earlier this decade, winning four Grammys and collaborating, alongside musical partner Joy Williams, with big names like T Bone Burnett and Taylor Swift. *Beulah*, which is White's first solo album in eight years, is the highly anticipated, first complete musical statement from the singer since his work with The Civil Wars.

There are no radical surprises on White's latest album, a 10-song set that features local Shoals musicians and delightful vocal accompaniment from the Secret Sisters. Instead, the record is, in many ways, the very project longtime fans of the Alabama singer-songwriter might have been hoping for for years: a direct collection of sharply-written originals that place White's vulnerable vocals front and center. It makes sense that these songs — which interrogate feelings of jealousy, unworthiness, vengefulness, and commitment — are some of the most personal songs White has ever released: they're also the first batch of songs he has ever composed solely by himself.

That's not to say the album isn't stylistically diverse. Indeed, White plays with dynamics to great effect on Beulah, drastically changing up tempos and arrangements from one song to the next. He displays his hard-rock leanings like never before on "What's So" and "Fight For You," whereas delicate, acoustic originals like "The Once And Future Queen" and "Hate The Way You Love Me" show off the singer's penchant for soft spoken gravitas.

The latter song is the undisputed highlight here, a moving declaration of deep love that wrestles with romantic inadequacy and ranks as one of White's greatest compositions to date. It's just one of several songs, alongside "The Martyr" and "I've Been Over This Before," that comprise a jam-packed Side B of *Beulah*, where the album kicks into high gear after a slowish start.

If *Beulah* is any indication, John Paul White sounds best when he's making music on precisely his own terms. — JONATHAN BERNSTEIN



SHOVELS & ROPE
LITTLE SEEDS
(NEW WEST) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

"I KNOW EXACTLY who you think you are," sing Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst, the husband-and-wife vocalists of Shovels & Rope, at the beginning of *Little Seeds*, the South Carolina group's fourth album. "I Know" evolves into an ominous swirl of feedback and menace, but these opening words ring with a tinge of comfort. Indeed, Shovels & Rope know exactly who they are, and *Little Seeds* is an album-length celebration of their particular brand of Americana.

Even when the subject matter gets grim, Shovels & Ropes are a band focused on good vibes. They have a way of cramming words into each line so that their songwriting recalls both traditional folk music and tongue twisters. The duo also has a palpable delight in singing together and finishing each other's sentences. "You and I ..." sings Hearst in the refrain of the Jack White-esque "Buffalo Nickel," to which Trent responds, "Working around each other." It's an apt, if literal, approximation of their technique, even if the song itself might actually be about violently robbing a bank.

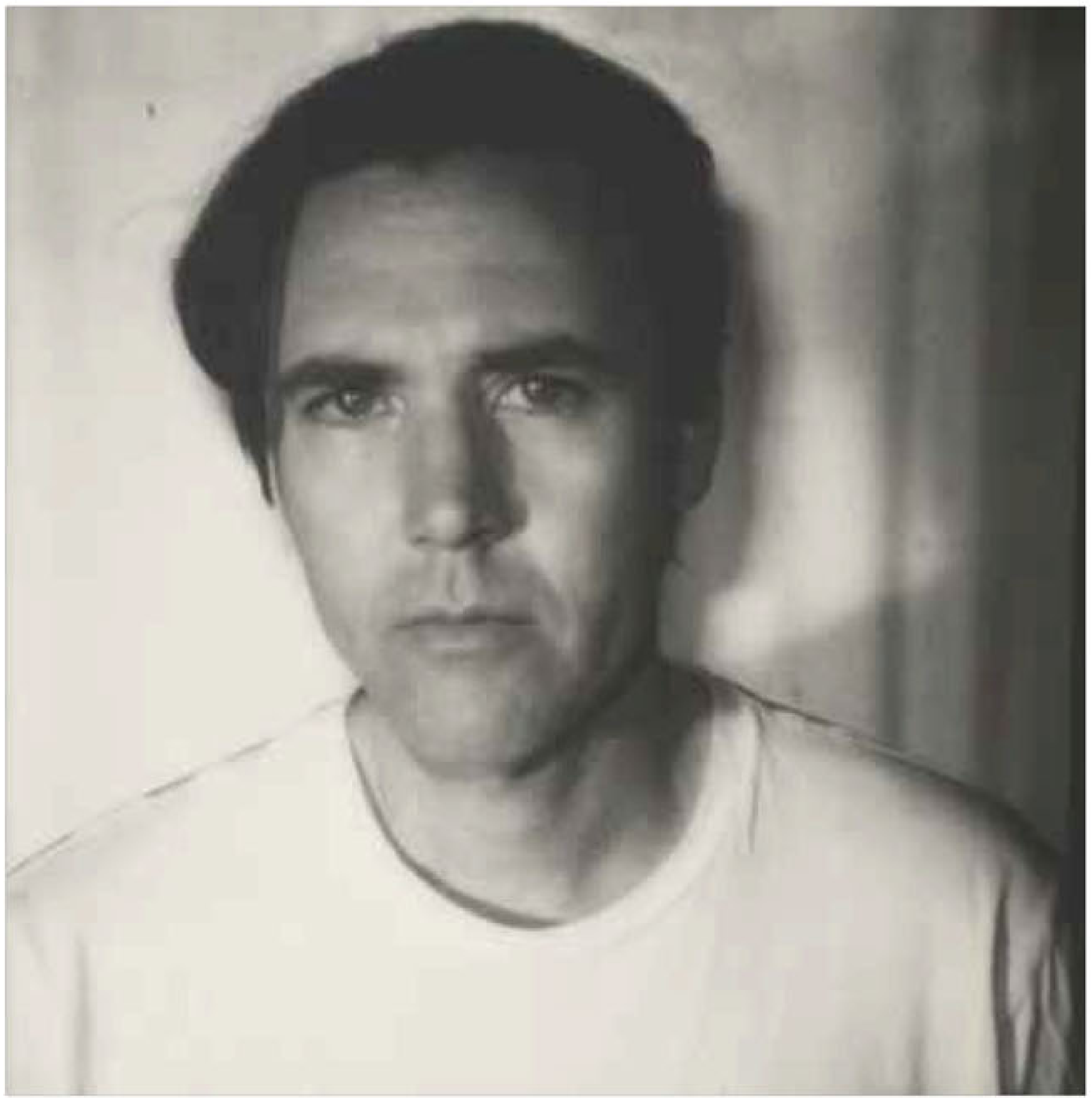
The combination of the macabre subject matter and the celebratory music feels akin to last spring's *Pile*, an album by Houston, Texas' A Giant Dog. But where that band explodes with party-friendly garage rock, Shovels & Rope let things sizzle a little bit longer. They also display a greater penchant for experimentation. Songs like the beatific "St. Anne's Parade" show that they can linger in their happiness just as well as they can in their morbid fantasies, and "BYWR" finds them adopting a topical, elegiac edge. Even so, the album's greatest moments are the ones that don't stray too far from Shovels & Rope's tried-and-true. "I know exactly where you got that sound," they sing in "I Know," "See you next year on your way back down." It's the kind of tough-love teasing that can only come from a band clearly on the way up.
— SAM SODOMSKY

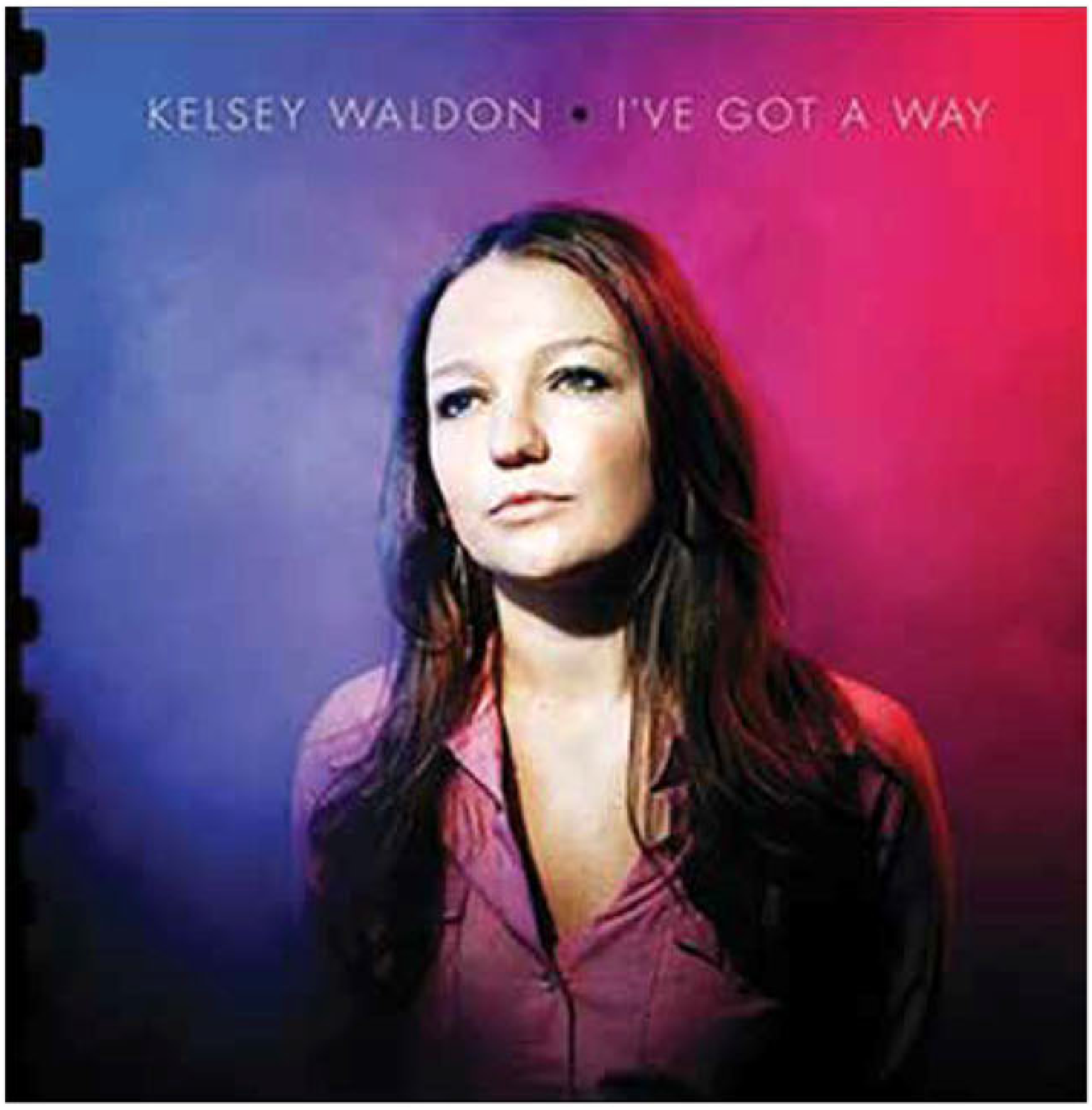
LUCY DACUS
NO BURDEN
(MATADOR) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

LUCY DACUS HAS A VOICE THAT'S easy to warm up to. Her honeyed tones are comforting and soulful, closer to the jazzy pop of someone like Feist than the stream-of-consciousness sing-speak of Courtney Barnett. It's one of the Richmond, Virginia singer-songwriter's greatest strengths. Even when the subject matter is fraught with sadness or uncertainty, it's never delivered in such a way as to set the listener on edge. She's letting us in on a private conversation, one in which we're not eavesdropping but a welcome ear.

That doesn't mean there's no edge to Dacus' debut, *No Burden*, released via Matador after a smaller initial release via Egghunt earlier this year. It's a rock album, and one that hits hard in its most soaring peaks. The bluesy "Troublemaker Doppelgänger" has swagger for days, while the fuzzy "Strange Torpedo" gradually grows denser and fuzzier over the course of its four-and-a-half minutes. Rather than seeming out of step with Dacus' softly expressive coo, the garagey muscle behind a song like opener "I Don't Wanna Be Funny Anymore" only reinforces the burdensome thought process (contrary to the album's title) behind her identity crisis. "Is there room in the band? I don't need to be the frontman," she sings.

As powerful as Dacus can be with the roar of a full band behind her, she only needs a guitar and a little bit of reverb to leave an impact. "Dream State" is one of the most affecting songs of the bunch, the tune dropping to near silence as she croons, "Without you I am surely the last of our kind." She repeats the line at the end of "Familiar Place," a simple, melancholy strummer that's as gorgeous as anything here. Dacus may not be the last of her kind, but performers with the kind of effortless warmth she evokes are certainly a rare breed. — JEFF TERICH





CASS McCOMBS
MANGY LOVE
(ANTI-) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

AFTER TWO SPRAWLING ALBUMS that pushed over 75 minutes each and were likely difficult for even Cass McCombs' fans to absorb, the skewed folk-rock-pop singer-songwriter retrenches to a more digestible hour-long, 12-tune set.

On initial listen, the easy flowing tunes generally sound predictable: overly smooth and with a tendency toward almost schlocky, blue-eyed soul arrangements, complete with sweet background singers and occasional strings. But the devil lies in the details of McCombs' songs. Dig down to the lyrics underneath the sultry R&B groove of "Opposite House" and find typically odd, even avant-garde ideas like "The ceiling's on the floor/ Floor's in the refrigerator/ What of the door?" waiting within. It seems as if McCombs is enticing us into his twisted world like the sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, only to have us crash on the rocks as his words drift around reality with meanings likely only understood by him. Still, it's entertaining to muse on the significance of "Help me to remember to forget/ To forget what hasn't happened yet" from the equally headscratchingly titled "Medusa's Outhouse."

McCombs reveals these concepts with deceptively placid, tranquil, spoken-sung vocals that seem to be communicating far less radically enigmatic phrases. Sometimes his subtle melodies find singalong hooks as on the soulful, light funk of "Cry." But once you wrap yourself around words like "No gold for bards/ No laurel enough to bushel into the bed/ You tell me one thing and do the other — that's weird," you realize it's better to just go along with the flow.

As hard to parse as McCombs is, it's better to ponder cryptic, mind-twisting poetry than be bored by clichéd notions of love and loss. This is shrewd, layered music that demands the songs be mulled over and scrutinized, even if that may not provide answers to questions McCombs poses.
— HAL HOROWITZ

KELSEY WALDON
I'VE GOT A WAY
(MONKEY'S EYEBROW RECORDINGS) ★ ★ ★ ★

"THEY DON'T MAKE 'EM like they used to," is the clichéd complaint often lodged by classic country lovers about contemporary music so overproduced or cookie-cutter commercial that to label it C&W is a stretch. But with some judicious searching, it's not hard to find young artists who stay true to the archetypes of Hank Sr., George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Emmylou Harris and others while updating the sound just enough not to appear slavish imitators. On her sophomore release, it's clear that Kelsey Waldon is firmly in that camp.

Waldon doesn't stray from the template of stripped-down ballads, waltz-time weepers and high-lonesome heartbreakers chronicled on her terrific 2014 debut. Waldon's honeyed voice, sweet-tart lyrics and gently rolling melodies shape songs whose choruses are so memorable, you'll think you heard originals such as the defiant "All By Myself" before. The opening fast shuffle of "Dirty Old Town," with its squiggly, snakelike pedal steel, seems plucked from the Flying Burrito Brothers and the bluesy lope of "Don't Hurt The Ones (Who've Loved You The Most)" takes a page out of the Dwight Yoakam sing-'em-and-weep songbook.

The production keeps the instrumentation basic with few obvious overdubs and a focus on Waldon's voice, lyrics and tunes. Like Harris and Lee Ann Womack, Waldon never oversells these performances, which makes them feel even more personal, touching and occasionally bitter as in the rebellious kiss-off "You Can Have It." She even rocks out on the snappy lyrics of "False King" ("You can't place a crown on the head of a clown/ And hope he turns out to be a king").

But it's the ballads that dominate and where Waldon shines brightest. She spins stories with the heart and soul found in the most classic of country music, proving that they do indeed still make 'em like they used to.
— HAL HOROWITZ

LYRIC CONTEST

1st PLACE

"GET-AWAY CAR"

Kerann Christopherson
Morgan Hill, California

This is the dress I was wearing
When we finally settled the score
When I walked out on him,
the very last time
This is the dress that I wore

This is the car I drove off in
When I chose not to lower the bar
When I backed out of his driveway,
the very last time
This was the get-away car

This was the get-away car
It's not very fast but it goes pretty far
On one tank of gas
On one broken heart
This was the get-away car

This is the necklace he sent me
When we were in love, way back
then
Back before we ended up wrecked
This is the necklace he sent

This is the camera he gave me
When we drove down
to the ocean that day
My memory's still loaded
with pictures of him
This is the camera he gave me

And this was the get-away car
It's not very fast but it goes pretty far
On one tank of gas
On one broken heart
This was the get-away car

Don't know why I keep
bringing up these things
I've got no real reason to mention
I would get rid of them all,
if I could afford
To replace any of them

This is the section of highway I took
By this point, I was no longer lost
Here's the place where
I crossed the very last line
Here's the road I traveled on

And this was the get-away car
It's not very fast but it goes pretty far
On one tank of gas
On one broken heart
This was the get-away car

This is the spot I found myself
standing
When I finally let go, for good
When I got home, all alone,
on that very last night
This is the spot where I stood

And this is the dress I was wearing

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2nd PLACE

"GHOSTS AND BROKEN HEARTS"

Peter Sheardy
Rolling Meadow, Illinois

There's a ghost in the corner
And it looks a lot like you
Maybe I should go and warn her
Remind her that we are through

'Cause I don't need no reunion
Don't want to be the host
There might be a little confusion
'Cause I don't believe in ghosts

(Chorus)
Ghosts and broken hearts
Are both empty and dead
Ghosts and broken hearts
Are both hungry to be fed
Both will haunt you
And pick your sanity apart
Sometimes there's no escaping
Ghosts and broken hearts

The return of the departed
This familiar specter
A refugee from the darkness
Just a heartache collector

Bridge

Will I ever pay the ransom?
To satisfy this phantom

(Repeat chorus)

SEPTEMBER OCTOBER WINNERS

3RD PLACE

"NOT A ROAD IN BUFFALO"
Joe Colavito
Ringwood, New Jersey

We had run out
of tears to cry
As I watched her
wave goodbye,
There was no reason
to pretend,
There's no good way
to lose a friend,
I guess I'll spend
all my time
Trying to get her
off my mind,
I wish I had a place to go
Or a way to disappear,
There's not a road
in Buffalo
That could get me
out of here.

I thought I knew
my way around
But the only thing
I've found
Is that I miss
the way we were
And now I'm miles
away from her,
I know tomorrow
day will break
But now what
difference will it make,
I wish I had a place to go
Or a way to disappear,
There's not a road
in Buffalo
That could get me
out of here.

Sometimes we lose the
things we need,
Sometimes love is
hard to read,
I wonder why I
had to wait,
I'm always
seeing things too late,
There's a shadow
on the ground,
Why can't I
make it turn around,
I wish I had a place to go
Or a way to disappear,
There's not a road
in Buffalo
That could get me
out of here.

If there's a joke
then it's on me,
I was so close
I could not see,
She needed me
to make her stay
But I was
driving her away,
Now she's gone
on to Montreal
As the snow
begins to fall,
Wish I had a place to go
Or a way to disappear,
There's not a road
in Buffalo
That can get me
out of here.

4TH PLACE

"Lillian"
Ynana Rose
San Luis Obispo, California

Lillian I see you as a teenage girl
Dreaming of leaving your small town world
Getting ready for the barn dance on Saturday
Hoping for a knight in armor to carry you away

I see you listening to the radio, putting on your dress
High-heeled shoes, your Sunday best
Long legs dancing across the floor
Sweet sixteen in 1934

(Chorus)

Lillian, Lillian
I never really saw you as Lillian
You were always "Grandma" to me
But Lillian, now I see

Lillian I see you at the age of 33
A single mom in the city working six days a week
All the knights in armor rode off without you
So you dig down deep and do what you have to do

(Chorus)

(Bridge)
Now that I'm grown, with children of my own
I know the price you paid to be strong
I never realized just how much you taught me
Until you were gone

Lillian I see you on the San Francisco pier
Oysters on the half shell, drinking a cold beer
Wearing rhinestone jeans, 80 years old
There's a dance on Saturday, and you're gonna go

HONORABLE MENTION

"The Soldier And Me"
Jason Martin
Clarksville, Tennessee

"World Keeps Turning"
Daniel Bertges,
South Burlington, Vermont

"Lie To Me"
Lisa Scarborough
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

"Make It Home Again"
Lisa Scarborough
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

"What A Busy Day"
John Carlson
Holly Springs, North Carolina

"Dragonfly View"
Belinda McCall
Fairfax, Virginia

"Southern Oak"
Jeb Barry
Adams, Massachusetts

"Captain"
Robbie Phillips & Emma Boyer-Shaul
Wahiawa, Hawaii

"Hitchhiker"
Garry Morse
Colonial Heights, Virginia

"Timberland Dam"
John Stone
Dallas, Texas

AMERICAN SONGWRITER LYRIC CONTEST Q&A

1ST PLACE

"Get-away Car"

Written by Kerann Christopherson

Interview by Caine O'Rear

What was the inspiration for this song?
It wasn't inspired by any real-life situation, just by the idea of how everyday possessions can be reminders.

We mostly think of getaway cars in the context of a police chase, but you turn the table on that idea.
I didn't think much about it — for a long time, that line was only a verse line. These lyrics were in my drafts folder forever, with no chorus at all, until a day before the deadline, so the song itself finally made an escape, thanks to the contest. I didn't think it would win, I was just happy to finish it. Sometimes it takes some kind of external pressure, you know?

You mentioned previously that you're not really a musician. When you write lyrics, are you writing to music?
No. I've tried writing lyrics over melodies from my songwriting friends, and it doesn't work. Usually, rough melodies show up along with my lyrics, but they aren't any good. Once in a while, I'll pick them out on the piano, just to be sure they're completely unusable. Most times I don't need to confirm how bad they are. It's funny how those melodies stick to each song, despite never making it out of my head. As long as the words all fall where they're supposed to, I'm perfectly fine leaving the music to people who have the talent for that.

As far as musicianship goes, I'm a singer, so that counts for something. I do actually play a bit (guitar and piano), but since I'm not fond of practicing, I don't qualify as a musician in that sense. Maybe the Gibson J-35 will inspire me to improve? Singing is easy, though, and doesn't hurt my fingers. Besides, I live in a beautiful area of Northern California which means, if I'm not writing something, I'm outside with my camera, working in my garden, or over at the beach, with no time left for running scales.

You mentioned your husband was a great guitar player. Do you guys ever collaborate?
Yeah, my husband is a serious musician. He's pro. He's been playing around the Bay Area from the time he was 16 (as in "underage in this funky bar"), as lead guitarist in hard rock bands and classic country bands. He's equal parts Michael Schenker and Pete Anderson, and he'll be embarrassed when he sees this, but I'm not the only one who says it's true. He's a great singer, too. We do tons of cover songs together, and yes, he's written music for some of my lyrics. He also composes and records his own songs, mostly hard-rock and instrumentals. He's one of those multi-talented types who can play all the instruments on his recordings.

Do you do any other kinds of writing? Poems? Prose?
I've been writing rhyming poetry since I was a kid, on heavy subjects such as vicious parakeets. A handful of my poems are published. I also used to write micro-fiction. A bunch of my mini-stories were included in one of the first publications for people to read/listen to on their cells, long before smartphones existed, and my work has appeared in a few other places in print journals and magazines, and online.

Do you have a favorite songwriter? What is it you like about their work?
Kris Kristofferson has always been my favorite songwriter. I love his sense of justice and sense of humor — you can hear his heart in his songs. He uses ordinary language in an extraordinary way. He's also just completely cool without trying to be. (Oh yeah, and he has a cool name, too!)

My other favorites include Jason Isbell, Rosanne Cash, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, Harlan Howard, Cheryl Wheeler, Rhett Miller, Todd Snider, Kim Richey, Dwight Yoakam, Boz Scaggs, Stevie Wonder, Elvis Costello, and my Bay Area favorite, Maurice Tani.

What are the goals for your songwriting?
Is it bad to not have any "real" goals? Or can having fun be considered a goal? I write every day — for fun. If I find something to do with whatever I've come up with, that's just icing. Of course, it would obviously be exciting to hear something I co-wrote playing on the radio someday. But, I know how many people are out there – people with far more skill and determination than I have – going for it. So, I'm well aware of the chances. Still, it's good to dream, right? ★

MEET OUR 2016 JUDGES

JOHN PAUL WHITE (Co-founding partner, Single Lock Records; singer/songwriter/producer)
SARAH ZIMMERMANN (Recording Artist, Songwriter)
JONNY FRITZ (Songwriter/Leatherworker)
LAUREL KITTLESON (A&R Manager, Big Machine Label Group)
MATRACA BERG (Singer/Songwriter, Recording Artist)
GABE DIXON (Artist, Singer, Songwriter)
JOHN OZIER (GM, Creative, ole Music Publishing)
JEFF SKAGGS (Creative Director, Creative Nation)
WILL MCDONALD (Director of A&R/Marketing, Dualtone Music Group)
GRIFFIN HOUSE (Singer/Songwriter, Recording Artist)
BOBBY RYMER (Partner/GM, Writer's Den Music Group)
KRISTIE SLOAN (Co-owner, The GreenRoom PR)
GREG GALLO (Sr. Director Creative, Big Deal Music)
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CAINE O'REAR (Editor-In-Chief, American Songwriter magazine)

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Mary Gauthier is a Louisiana-born folk singer-songwriter. She is a regular performer on the Grand Ole Opry, and her songs have appeared on "Bob Dylan's Theme Time Radio Hour." In 2005, the Americana Music Association named her "Best New Artist Of The Year." She currently resides in Nashville.

GRAND PRIZE:
One First Place winner will win a round-trip flight to Nashville (domestic only) to write a song with this year's Dream Co-Writer, Mary Gauthier. The winner will also receive a full-band demo recording session at Omni Sound Studios.

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FINALISTS: Top four finalists have their lyrics printed in *American Songwriter* magazine.

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Hohner Music

By Andy McDonough

JBL EON ONE

The JBL EON ONE is an all-in-one, easy to transport column-type PA that borrows from the company's history of line array speaker research and their experience with large touring systems. It puts that technology in a small box that's a one-hand carry. It not only sounds good — it could change the way you think about portable sound systems.

As a working musician, if you can't move your sound system, set it up quickly or if you find yourself reaching in to try and beat feedback for the first set, your sound system needs an overhaul. The design of the EON One makes everything convenient. With no speaker wires to fuss with, speaker stands to unpack, and an integrated mixer at your disposal, you can have your sound system set up to cover a fair-sized room in seconds. A solo songwriter could carry just two cables — one for voice, and one for an instrument.

Just one more thing about the physical design: the "stick" part of the system breaks down into three pieces that are stored right in the bottom part of the system, locked down by a protective handle that covers the mixer. The entire unit weighs in the neighborhood of 40 lbs., so it's easy to carry and fits nicely in a trunk or seat.

For the more technical, the system integrates 380-watts of amplification with a six-channel mixer that provides volume, reverb, treble and bass controls. The first two channels are designed for microphone or instrument inputs, channels three and four are line level stereo inputs and channels five and six are 3.5mm iPod or Bluetooth inputs. A 10-inch subwoofer provides a tight and full bottom end that's ideal for acoustic instruments and the "stick" houses six 2-inch speakers in a setup that enhances the system's area of coverage. Like concert array speakers, these high-end speakers are normally very directional, but are arranged to provide a wide coverage pattern (50-degree vertical and 100-degree horizontal) – ideal for most playing situations.

Some stick systems I've used seem to require a lot of adjustment to sound correct. The basic design of the EON ONE made set-up easy the very first time I used it. Plus, it was easy to get a great sound right from the first song. (PRICE: $999.00)

LD MAUI 5 ULTRA PORTABLE COLUMN SPEAKER SYSTEM

The LD Maui 5 is dubbed "ultra portable" by the manufacturer, and it surely is. It's rated at 200 watts (RMS) and 800 watts (peak) and produces quite a lot of sound for a small system. If you are a solo acoustic performer looking to play small venues, LD's Maui 5 is a great choice.

As with all column speakers, ease of transport and set-up are the main features, but this little speaker system had some surprises when used in acoustic performance situations. A very nice feature is the ability to control the amount of low-end sound via a sub-level knob. Using the main output control and the sub level control you can find the perfect balance for any situation you find yourself in. The overall sound of the Maui 5 was great for both acoustic guitar and piano.

The input section of the mixer built into the Maui 5 is minimal, but certainly enough for a solo performer with one mic or line channel, high-z channel and bluetooth/MP3 inputs. Vocal performers might miss effects, but you can use an external mixer with effects to solve that problem and provide additional inputs.

Systems with subs can sometimes sound like you are listening to two systems, but the design of the Maui 5 is such that it has a very smooth transition for highs to lows. The top most column of the system contains four 3-inch speakers that handle high mids and highs while the sub contains an 8-inch driver that handles low-mids and lows. Working together, they sound more like a good stereo than a PA — a nice feature and something our audience noticed.

In terms of venue coverage, the system boasts a 120-degree horizontal and 20-degree vertical dispersion pattern. In larger rooms, or situations where an audience is above you (seated on bleachers) or below you (when you're on a stage), a 20-degree vertical dispersion might be an issue, but for covering intimate performing venues, the Maui 5 makes an ideal companion for a performer.

It's interesting to note that LD makes a variety of larger Maui systems. It's clear that the Maui 5 has profited from larger sound reinforcement designs. At just under 25 lbs., the unassuming Maui 5 is easy to move, simple to operate and offers some impressive audio performance for the solo performer. To protect if from the hazards of the road, consider buying the travel case (around $50) to keep all the pieces together and protected. (PRICE: $599.99) ★

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CHRIS THILE IS HOMEWARD BOUND

Roots music virtuoso is set to take over popular radio show "Prairie Home Companion" from Garrison Keillor this Fall

BY BRITTNEY McKENNA

Chris Thile

"A Prairie Home Companion" has been an American institution since it first hit airwaves on public radio in 1974. Original host and creator Garrison Keillor has been at the show's helm since then, earning a loyal following of Saturday night listeners and establishing himself as a preeminent figure in public radio after more than 40 years of music, storytelling, and, of course, "News from Lake Wobegon."

Last year, Keillor announced plans to hang up his "Prairie" hat, and that musician and frequent "Prairie Home" guest Chris Thile would take over as host in the Fall of 2016. Thile, well known in the bluegrass and Americana communities, is a singer, songwriter, virtuosic mandolin player and MacArthur fellow who, though most famous for his work with Nickel Creek and Punch Brothers, has shared stages and studios with everyone from Yo-Yo Ma to Béla Fleck. For some, then, Thile may be a surprising replacement for radio veteran Keillor. Thile counts himself among the surprised.

"I had his name in my caller ID because every now and then he would call, maybe a week or two before an episode of his show, 'Chris do you think you could, uh, make it out to the show? We'd love to have you. Call me back. Garrison,'" he says, his Keillor impression spot on. "It's as imposing a name as one can ever see come up on their cell phone, especially for someone like me who grew up listening to the show. It's like the whole of my life is on my cell phone."

After an evening of consideration, Thile called Keillor back and accepted the "Prairie" torch. The two made plans for Thile to guest host a couple of episodes, two of which took place in February of this year. Thile recruited guests like Sarah Jarosz and Ben Folds for those shows, relying heavily on music, including new songs like the Super Bowl-themed viral hit "Omahallelujah," which he wrote specifically for that night's broadcast. He plans to write a new song for each weekly broadcast when he takes over as host.

Keillor and Thile have developed something of a mentor-mentee relationship over the past couple of years, with Thile taking cues from the veteran while anticipating his October 15 start date.

"Honestly, knowing that I was about to do this and watching the master at work has been invaluable, particularly watching him navigate the incredibly treacherous, dangerous waters of a farewell season where people want so much from you as you're departing," he says. "It was amazing, like watching Sandy Koufax toss a no-hitter or seeing Roger Federer hit a forehand in the middle of the court. He did it with such aplomb and ease, and it was difficult for him, but you'd never know it listening to the radio. He's extraordinary."

Despite his seniority, Keillor was quick to offer Thile a simple but important piece of advice: be yourself. "Right from the first, [Keillor] said that I shouldn't try and host the show the way that he hosted the show," Thile says. "I think that was a great reminder and something he keeps stressing. The whole 'be yourself,' you know, we hear it our whole lives, from our parents and our tee-ball coaches, our first English teachers. And I'm a musician, that's the name of the game, or certainly the name of any interesting musician's game, to say that they are themselves in a way that no one else can be. That's what's special."

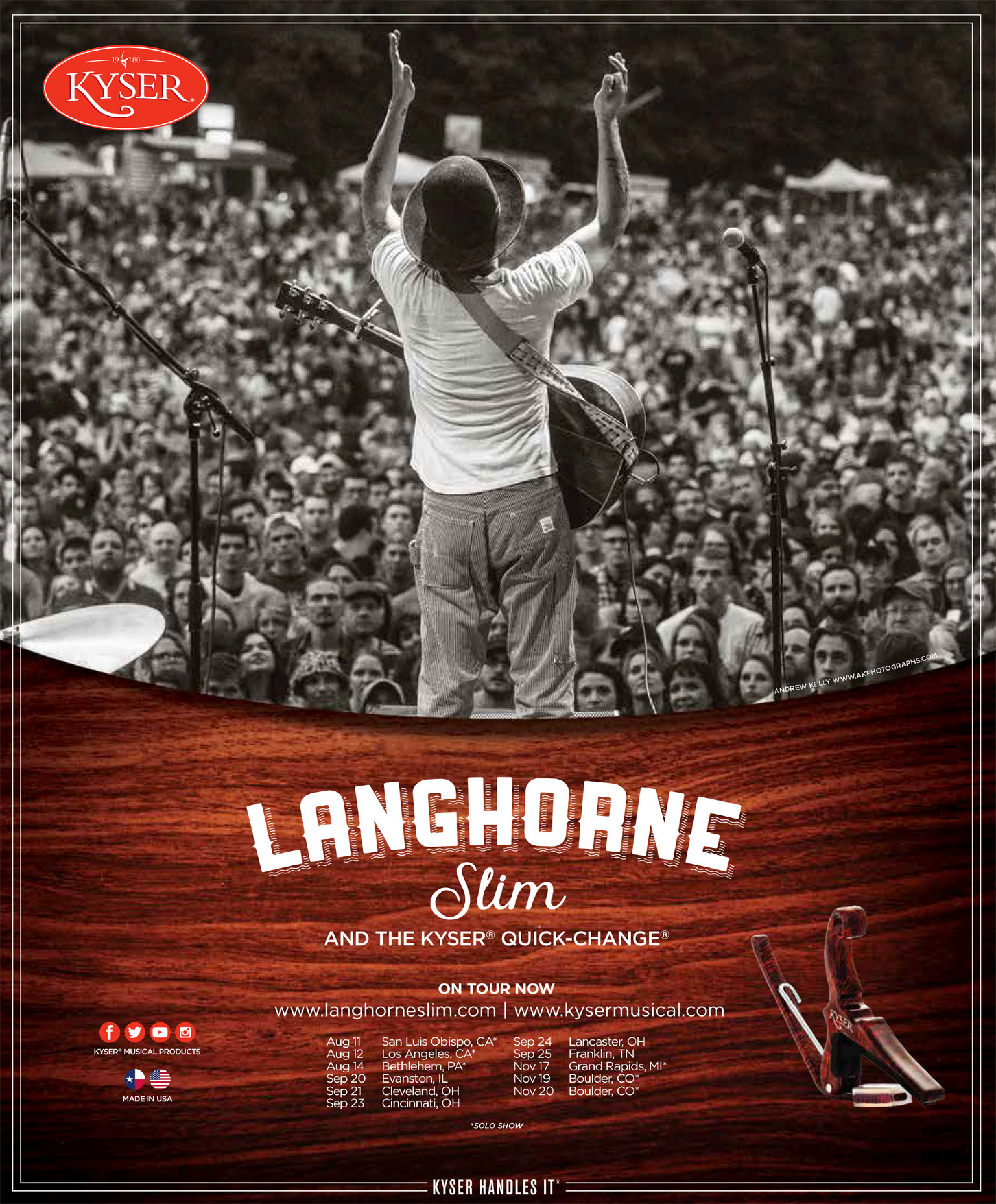
Thile is taking the reins of the show at a difficult time, mere weeks before the November 8 culmination of one of the most troubling, tempestuous presidential elections in decades. He's already thinking about how he plans to use the show both as a platform for discussing current events ("Take a good luck at this Trump fellow. Are you sure that you can get behind that? Really?" he laughs) and a respite for those worn out by seemingly endless political vitriol.

"In the midst of all these horrible things that we do to one another, it's really easy to forget that there are some basic human impulses that are so beautiful," he says. "They can be a reaction to the horrible things that we do. They can atone for the horrible things, or they can at least make an attempt to atone for the horrible things that we do to one another. We can't forget how beautiful life is."

Those beautiful things to which Thile refers will be familiar to fans of "Prairie Home" in its original incarnation, as he plans to keep the skits, poems, spoken word, and, of course, music that fans have grown to hold dearly over the years while putting his own spin on an old favorite.

"The prospect of hosting the show knowing that I'm going to be in a position where we'll have people's ears for two hours on an early Saturday evening, I'm going to need to address these things," he says. "All of us we'll be there trying to make beautiful things that make sense of our world that seems so broken right now." ★

Photo by Brantley Gutierrez



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BY DAVID ALZOFON

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Write A Road Song

Road songs often have an emotional impact far exceeding expectations. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," Kris Kristofferson sings in "Me And Bobby McGee," and therein lies the key.

Freedom (or the lack of it) is a potent, pervasive theme in road songs. Most of us lead lives of quiet desperation, but give us four wheels, an open highway, and a distant horizon, and our hearts take wing. "Freedom" might mean pushing a broom, as in "King Of The Road," or it might mean dreaming of driving to a better place in a "Fast Car," or maybe just getting out of "Lodi," but freedom calls to one and all.

This column challenges you to hitch a ride on your imagination and write a road song. Your destination will be all your own, but "Me And Bobby McGee" will be your road map.

The first lesson "Bobby" has to teach is sacrifice. Kris Kristofferson (Rhodes scholar, helicopter pilot, Army captain) declined an offer to teach English literature at West Point so he could come to Nashville, clean ashtrays at CBS studios, and write songs. His parents retaliated by disowning him. So how badly do you want this song? Are you willing to sacrifice at least a few hours of Facebook or cable TV time on the altar of creativity? (Hint: Better be!)

This column challenges you to hitch a ride on your imagination and write a road song.

The second lesson to be learned from "Bobby" is immersion. "Mickey Newbury once said ['60s Nashville] was like Paris in the '20s," Kristofferson recalled in a 2008 interview in *Performing Songwriter*. "We'd sit around all night, talking about what worked in a song and what didn't, and why." Moral: Find yourself a musical hothouse and move in. Meanwhile, immerse your ears in road songs.

Here's a starter list: "We Gotta Get Out Of This Place" (The Animals), "Sloop John B" (The Beach Boys), "On The Road Again" (Willie Nelson), "Born To Run" (Bruce Springsteen), "Where The Streets Have No Name" (U2), "King Of The Road" (Roger Miller), "Day After Day" (The Pretenders), "Two Of Us" (Paul McCartney), "Homeward Bound" (Simon & Garfunkel), "Life Is A Highway" (Tom Cochrane). Let's throw in "Calling Elvis" (Dire Straits) and "Autobahn" (Kraftwerk) as songs that induce highway hypnosis. Your task is to map their structure and ask yourself what makes them work. Then add 10 more songs to the list.

The third lesson from "Bobby" is imagery. In "Bobby" we find "faded jeans," a "dirty red bandana," and "windshield wipers slappin' time." We visit colorful places, such as Baton Rouge, the Kentucky coal mines, and Steinbeck country: Salinas (think *Of Mice And Men*).

Your task is to name four road trips that meant something to you. Begin listing specific sights and sounds, and don't quit until you have at least 20 per trip.

The fourth lesson is irony. In the *Performing Songwriter* interview, Kristofferson relates how producer/songwriter Fred Foster called him one night with a song title, "Me And Bobby McGee." The hook, said Foster, was that Bobby is a she. In road trip terms, irony is the difference between where you think you're going and where you wind up. The contrast can range from mildly amusing ("Bobby's a she") to tragic ("Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose"). Sum up each of your four trips in ironic terms. Think of pairs of opposites, such as gain and loss, beginning and end, high and low.

The fifth lesson is free association. Foster didn't give him much to go on, but Kristofferson began free associating on "Me And Bobby McGee" (he misheard the name), and got a classic. The first thing that clicked was a Mickey Newbury song, "Why You Been Gone So Long." "It had a rhythm that I really liked," he says. Next, strangely enough, was a film by Federico Fellini, *La Strada* (The Road), the tragic story of a traveling strongman who abandons his assistant, a feebleminded girl, by the side of the road.

Free associate on each of your road trips: alter names, narratives, and imagery. Link to a groove. Expand. Distill. Transform. And add a title.

The sixth lesson is structure. Two good measures will seed the rest. Like many a great hook, "Busted flat in Bat | -on Rouge" ("Sol-Sol-La, Sol-Mi | -Re-Mi") emphasizes emotional I-chord tones: "Sol" (hope), "La" (joy), and "Sol-Mi" (loss, sadness, nostalgia). "Wait-in' for a train" is an echo. That's two measures. Now aim for the cadence in measure 4: "When I's | feel-in' near as fad-ed as my | jeans" dithers over Do-Mi-Sol and lands on suspenseful "Re" with the V chord. The next four measures mirror the first, emphasizing tones of the V chord (Sol-Ti-Re-Fa), landing on sensitive "Mi" on "New Orleans" as the I chord returns.

The verses? Your road stories have them. Just pick and choose. The chorus? Look at your statements of irony. Tune up and get your road song rolling.

Says Kristofferson, "We felt like songwriting was something worth doing, regardless if you ever saw the light of day." That's the final lesson of "Me And Bobby McGee," and maybe the most important: passion. ★

DAVID ALZOFON is a former editor for *Guitar Player* magazine and the author of two books, most recently, *Compose Yourself!: Songwriting And Creative Musicianship in Four Easy Lessons*. He teaches guitar in San Diego, California.

AMERICANA:

Uncharted Territory

BY PAT PATTISON

Twenty years ago Gillian Welch released her seminal *Revival* into what can only be called *uncharted territory*. Almo Sounds, her label with Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, was hoping for a country album, à la Patsy Cline, since that was a *charted* territory in *Billboard* magazine. They had high hopes that "Paper Wings" would be the first single released to country radio, but its David Lynch feel and Jay Joyce's especially esoteric guitar solo pretty quickly put country in the rear-view mirror. The entire album was that way: an amalgam of folk, rock, alt-country and bluegrass, later to become known as Americana.

Americana is now charted territory in *Billboard*, thanks in part to Gillian Welch, David Rawlings and T Bone Burnett's insistence on remaining true to their vision of what Gillian Welch music should be. They paved the way for many artists to follow, reflected currently in the work of Jason Isbell, among others.

This Americana lineage will continue to evolve.

Americana continues the traditions of its parents and grandparents. It tells stories in the dialects of its characters. Its characters are real, and they, for the most part, are smart and relatively self-aware. There are fewer "ain't-sayers" here than in country and country's step-child, Southern rock. Its images are vivid and specific and, at its best, cliché free. Most important, it keeps us involved in the *forward progression* of the story. Not the easiest thing to accomplish.

The song form of much Americana is verse/chorus and, though there is occasional bridge-work, it relies more on its roots in bluegrass as a two-function journey, eschewing bridges for instrumental solos over the same chord patterns. Assuming that the choruses repeat mostly the same way, there's a challenge keeping the story moving while repeating what you just said eight or 16 bars earlier, UNLESS you find a way to make the chorus *mean more each time you repeat it*. If you can accomplish that task, using the intervening material to refract a different light on each chorus, the forward motion continues *and* you still have a memorable, sing-along section.

Revival is a clinic on the productive use of repetition. Look, for example, at the evolution of the chorus in Gillian and David's "One More Dollar":

A long time ago I left my home
For a job in the fruit trees
But I missed those hills with the windy pines
For their song seemed to suit me

So I sent my wages to my home
Said we'd soon be together
For the next good crop would pay my way
And I would come home forever

One more dime to show for my day
One more dollar and I'm on my way
When I reach those hills, boys
I'll never roam
One more dollar and I'm going home

At this point in the story the chances of getting another dollar and going home seem reasonable, or at least without much impediment. Then, a shift:

No work said the boss at the bunkhouse door
There's a freeze on the branches
So when the dice came out at the bar downtown
I rolled and I took my chances

One more dime to show for my day
One more dollar and I'm on my way
When I reach those hills, boys
I'll never roam
One more dollar and I'm going home

Now chances are fading with each roll of the dice, and you can feel hope diminishing as the chorus floats by – something you didn't feel the first time you heard it.

And finally, watch the last chorus sink into bleakness after this wonderful turn:

A long time ago I left my home
Just a boy passing twenty
Could you spare a coin and a Christian prayer
For my luck has turned against me

One more dime to show for my day
One more dollar and I'm on my way
When I reach those hills, boys
I'll never roam
One more dollar and I'm going home
One more dollar
Boys I'm going home

No chance now.

Look also at Gillian's "Annabelle," "Pass You By" and "Tear My Stillhouse Down," how she turns the prism each time, with each elegant verse shining a deeper light on the repeated choruses.

Jason Isbell, fresh from his 2016 Americana Grammy wins, accomplishes the same storytelling magic in his "Elephant," a story laced with fresh images that unveil a darker and darker picture each time the transformed chorus appears with its consistent refrain,

try to ignore the elephant somehow
Somehow

gathering new light each time it comes around.

She said Andy you're better than your past,
winked at me and drained her glass,
cross-legged on the barstool, like nobody sits anymore.
She said Andy you're taking me home,
but I knew she planned to sleep alone.
I'd carry her to bed and sweep up the hair from the floor

If I had fucked her before she got sick
I'd never hear the end of it
she don't have the spirit for that now
We just drink our drinks and laugh out loud,
bitch about the weekend crowd,
and try to ignore the elephant somehow
somehow

At this point, you have only the barest hint of what the Elephant might be, and that is deflected by his use of the definite article in

…sweep up the hair from the floor

rather than *her* hair. He uses the cliché "the elephant in the room" but makes it fresh by avoiding the whole phrase, simply nodding in its direction. It seems bigger that way. Then of course, the elephant becomes clearer:

She said Andy you crack me up,
Seagrams in a coffee cup,
sharecropper eyes and her hair almost all gone.
When she was drunk she made cancer jokes,
made up her own doctor's notes,

surrounded by her family, I saw that she was dying alone.

I'd sing her classic
country songs
and she'd get high
and sing along.
She don't have the voice
to sing with now
We'd burn these joints in effigy,
cry about what we used to be,
and try to ignore
the elephant somehow
Somehow

With *cancer jokes*, you see where the hair on the floor came from. The "elephant" grows larger …

So where can the story go from here? Then, the final flash of insight:

I buried her a thousand times,
giving up my place in line,
but I don't give a damn about that now
There's one thing that's real clear to me,
no one dies with dignity.
We just try to ignore
the elephant somehow
We just try to ignore
the elephant somehow
We just try to ignore
the elephant somehow
Somehow
Somehow

This brilliant final section explodes, and lands the elephant squarely on our own chests, as we try to ignore our own descent into darkness, somehow. Somehow.

This Americana lineage continues and will continue to evolve, as it has from Gillian Welch to Jason Isbell. At the core, it belongs to the tradition of the old troubadours. It tells you stories. It speaks from a clear vision. It takes you into uncharted territories. ★

Pat Pattison is a professor at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches lyric writing and poetry.

Photo by David McClister

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BY RAND BISHOP

MAKIN' STUFF UP

No Respect For The Night Train

Marion James and band perform at nightclub, c. 1971. L to R: James "Buzzard" Stuart, Marion James, (unidentified), and Billy Cox.

Photo Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

"And an *oh-pa-dacious* hello to you!" While civil rights protestors across the South were being fire-hosed, attacked by police dogs, and hauled off in paddy wagons, inside the studios of WLAC TV, host Noble Blackwell grinned his trademark opening phrase. In a still-segregated Bible-belt town renowned for hillbilly singers in cowboy hats, *Night Train* featured purveyors of R&B in tight suits, thin ties, and shoe-shined hair a full five years before *Soul Train* debuted in Chicago.

It was 1964 and the pulsating African-American music scene that had thrived in Nashville for three decades was exhaling its last gasp. Downtown's historic Bijou Theater, the movie and vaudeville house "exclusively for colored people," had been razed. Next door, the soon-to-be-destroyed New Era Club squeezed in final appearances by Aretha, B.B. King, Jerry Butler, and Etta James.

As far back as the 1930s, the jumping joints of Jefferson Street, flush with illegal gambling cash, had given local talent steady employment, while drawing acts from the Chitlin Circuit. Little Richard called Club Revillot his favorite tour stop because, "I didn't make $100 (per week) nowhere but there really." The house band at Del Morocco featured a scrawny, southpaw axeman named Jimmy (not yet Jimi) Hendrix. Nicknamed "Marbles" (because everyone thought he'd lost his …) Hendrix strutted down to the Baron one night in '63 and challenged bluesman Johnny Jones to a battle of the six-strings. Jones sent "Marbles" slinking away in defeat.

Johnny Jones had been recruited to Music City from Knoxville — where he'd been gigging in a back-up band for female impersonators — by a music-biz Renaissance man named Ted Jarrett. As a boy, Jarrett's domineering grandfather once threatened him with a beating for even attempting a song lyric. However, the chubby, defiant Jarrett showed ol' Grandpop! In 1955, Jarrett became the first African-American tunesmith to pen a #1 country song (Webb Pierce's "Love, Love, Love") while his production of "It's Love, Baby (24 Hours A Day)" featuring hometown belter Earl Gaines peaked at #2 R&B. "It's Love …" charted again with Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Ruth Brown, and a British beat band called The Knack.

Jarrett went on to discover and produce Gene Allison, for whom he composed the 1958 Top-5 crossover hit, "You Can Make It If You Try" (subsequently covered by The Rolling Stones). Jarrett's production home was Ernie's Music Mart, which also housed one of Nashville's most successful indie R&B imprints, Excello Records. Entrepreneur Ernie Young financed his make-shift studio and label with mail-order record sales generated by the *Ernie's Record Parade* broadcast on WLAC AM. Since 1946, that station's 50,000-watt signal had R&B diehards across the nation dialing in. South Carolina native James Brown recalled, "WLAC was all we ever listened to."

Although Nashville's R&B scene never produced a Sam Cooke, an Aretha, an Otis, or a Marvin, the local talent, groomed in the nightspots of Jefferson Street and Printers Alley, was undeniably first-class. (The Country Music Hall of Fame hosted an exhibit on Music City's early R&B scene in 2004-2005.) Nashville native Cecil Gant, who had refined his prodigious piano-vocal stylings on the pre-WWII New Era stage, exploded onto Billboard's *Harlem Hit Parade* in 1944 with "I Wonder." On "We're Gonna Rock" (1950) Gant attacked no-holds-barred piano rock and roll seven years before Jerry Lee got a whole lotta shakin' goin' on. In 1954, Christine Kittrell's big, sultry voice racked up an R&B hit with "Sittin' Here Drinkin'." Jimmy Sweeney's soaring tenor was at least as sweet as The Platters' Tony Williams. Jimmy Church combined Jackie Wilson sex-appeal with Sam Cooke-ish vocal timbres. Roscoe Shelton wailed with genuine soul. Gene Allison delivered gospel-tinged passion. In 1966, Marion James' crossed over with "That's My Man," the same year another multi-talented Nashville native skyrocketed to momentary stardom.

Born to sightless parents with colorblind musical tastes, Bobby Hebb tap danced on the Bijou stage in a child sibling act, played spoons for Roy Acuff as a teenager at the Grand Ole Opry and, in his 20s, contributed to myriad recording sessions on guitar and trumpet. "Sunny," which Hebb wrote and recorded in New York, won him an opening slot on The Beatles' last tour. Hebb's only hit composition ranks 25th on BMI's most-played songs of the 20th century.

The entire infrastructure was in place for Nashville to become one of America's capitals of R&B and soul — talent, performance venues, studios, labels, radio and TV exposure. So, why did Music City fall so short of Memphis and Motown? Should urban renewal be blamed for knocking down the Bijou and the New Era? Or Mayor Beverly Briley's axe-wielding anti-gambling reformers who chopped The Baron into toothpicks? Or was Interstate 40 at fault for bulldozing through the once-booming African-American businesses of Jefferson Street?

Certainly, all those factors contributed. Ironically, however, the most glaring missing ingredient is the very product in which Music City takes the most pride — *GREAT SONGS!* One "Sunny" can't possibly make up for "Hold On, I'm Comin'," "Try A Little Tenderness," "Heard It Through the Grapevine," and "Baby Love," let alone the rest of the astounding songbook authored by Sam Cooke, Steve Cropper, David Porter, Isaac Hayes, Otis Redding, Al Green, Holland/Dozier/Holland, Marvin Gaye, Ashford and Simpson, Gamble and Huff, Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham.

Without consistently great songwriting, Nashville's *Night Train* was left with no R-E-S-P-E-C-T … and Noble Blackwell signing off with, "In the meantime, take especially good care of yourself. And be good to your neighbor!" ★

A four-decade music biz vet, **RAND BISHOP** (www.randbishop.com) has been a major label recording artist, session singer, A&R exec, platinum producer, and hit publisher. As a songwriter, he counts more than 250 cuts, including country radio's most played song of 2002, "My List," (Toby Keith).

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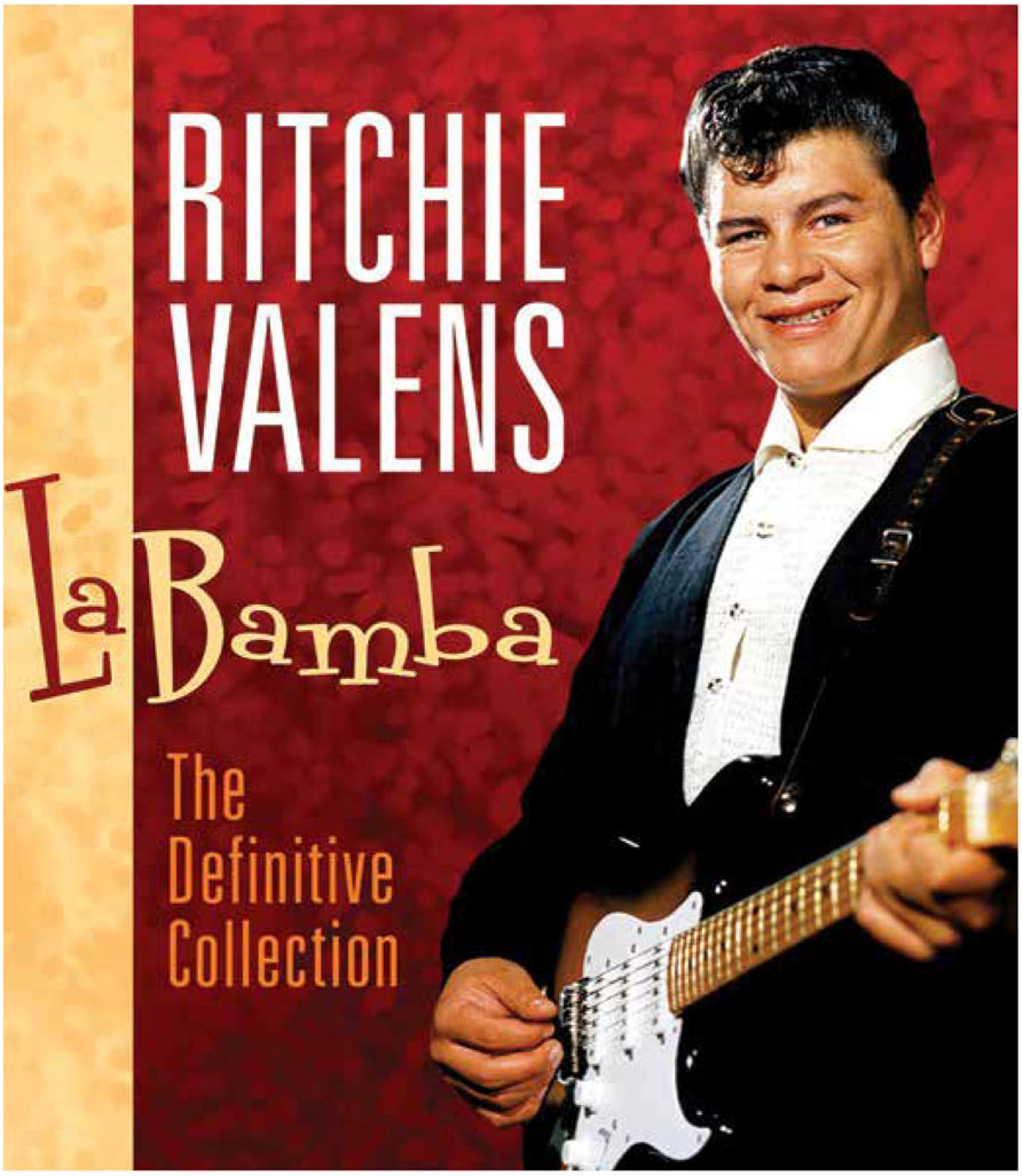
American Songwriter

BY PAUL ZOLLO

Ritchie Valens



Ritchie Valens is most famous for writing "La Bamba," a rock and roll classic adapted from a Mexican folk song that became a modest hit in 1958, and a hit again in 1987 when Los Lobos recorded it for *La Bamba*, a biopic about him.

Even before writing "La Bamba," Valens would wow crowds with his words and music. Known as "the Little Richard of the Valley" for his spirited performances, he'd often insert inspired, improvised lines into the famous songs he sang.

"La Bamba" emerged directly from the folk tradition, the same pathway Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger walked and on which Bob Dylan followed — of writing new words for old songs. Adapted from a Mexican wedding song from Veracruz, it was a natural choice for Ritchie, who improvised his own lyrics for it as he did for every song he sang. Growing up speaking English, he learned the original words for it phonetically from his Aunt Ernestine. His record of it peaked at #22 on the pop charts in 1958, the highest charting single ever in Spanish up to that point.

Now, he's also famous as much for his death as his life. Along with Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper, he died in the February 3, 1959 plane crash forever dubbed "the day the music died" in Don McLean's "American Pie."(Dion, who was also part of the winter tour through the icy Midwest, survived the crash by saving the requisite $35 for the private plane.) Valens was 17 when he died.

He was born Ricardo Steven Valenzuela on May 13, 1941 in Pacoima, California. His folks both loved music, and filled the home with Mariachi as well as American R&B and jump blues. Starting at the age of five, he mastered one instrument and musical style after the next, from singing to drums to trumpet to guitar to writing his own songs.

Entirely self-taught, he easily mastered the guitar right-handed though he was a lefty. At 16 he joined a rock and roll band, The Silhouettes, and quickly ascended to its lead vocalist as well. He was a rock star before the world knew what such a thing was.

It was in middle school that Bob Keane of Del-Fi Records heard him. He invited Valens to his Silverlake home for an impromptu audition, and recorded him on a two-track Ampex 601-2, using two Neumann U-47 mikes. He signed Valens to Del-Fi, shortening his surname to Valens to make it easy on the American audience.

Keane realized early on that Ritchie was a songwriter. Together they spent hours in the family basement writing and developing songs. They wrote "Come On, Let's Go," and also worked together on cover tunes, a great education for any songwriter, such as "Framed" by Leiber and Stoller, which Ritchie recorded.

The idea of turning "La Bamba" into a pop song was not one Valens immediately embraced; he initially worried about any perceived disrespect for his heritage. But the infectious spirit of the song was undeniable, especially when emboldened by great session musicians. This old folk song, born from the Son Jarocho style of fusing Spanish, Mexican and African grooves, was forever transformed into a multi-cultural rock and roll classic.

But it was the B-side. Valens' song "Donna," written about his former girlfriend, was deemed the stronger tune, and was made the A-side, with the odd Mexican rock hybrid on the flipside. Both became hits, but the B-side became far more famous and beloved. This early instance of world music — combining a traditional ethnic style with rock and roll — helped launch his career. He soon left high school to become one of the world's first rock stars.

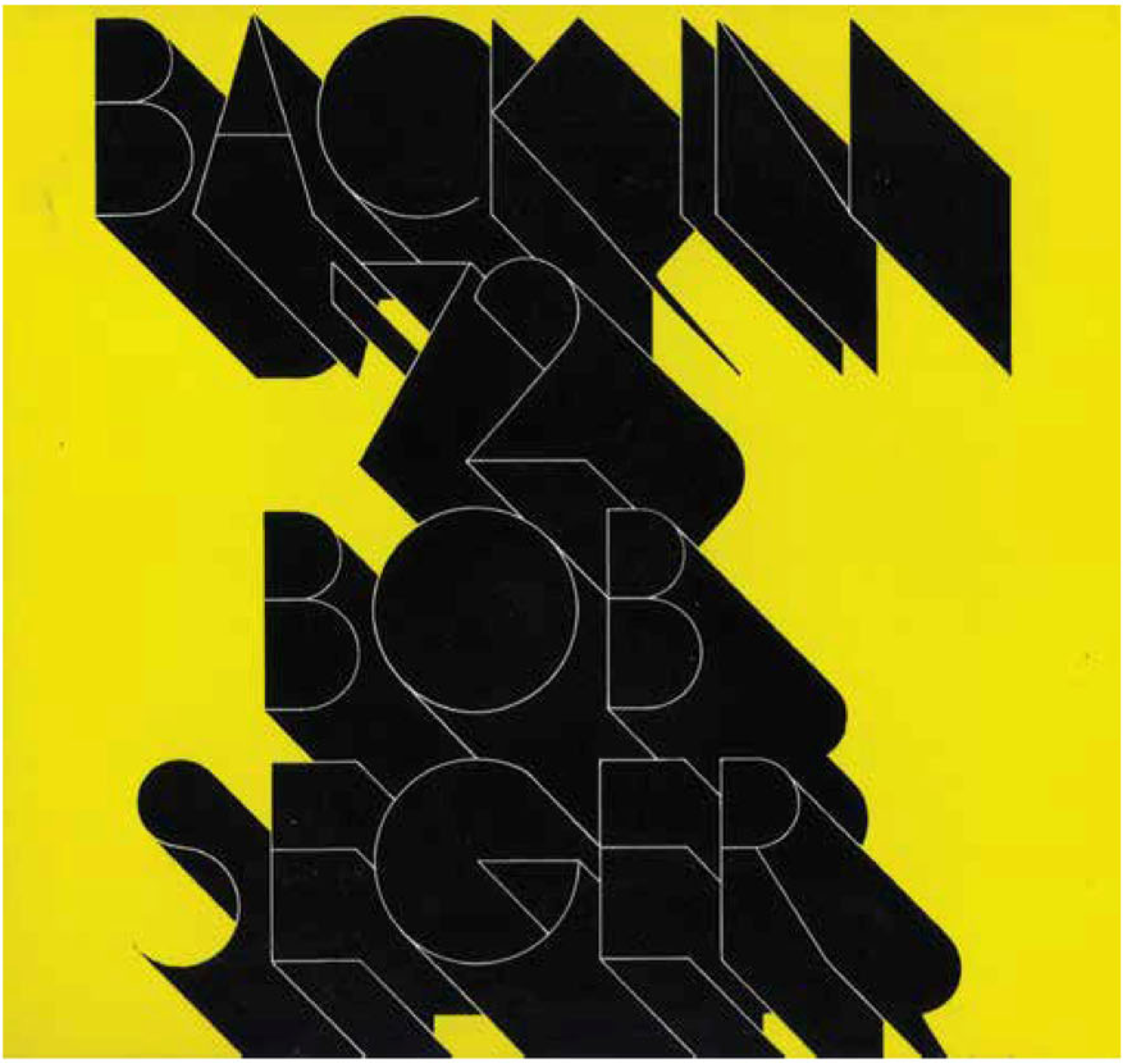
Though Valens' life and still new career came to a tragic and sudden end on that winter night in 1959, his star has only brightened, and "La Bamba" has become even more cherished and iconic.

When *Rolling Stone* came out with their list of the 500 Best Rock Songs of All Time, only one non-English song was included. It was, of course, "La Bamba." ★

BY JIM BEVIGLIA

"Turn The Page"

By Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band



There's an adage that says you should write what you know. So it's understandable that rock and roll songwriters have tried to make sense in song out of their nomadic existences pretty much since the dawn of the genre. The "road song" really came into vogue once managers and promoters realized just how lucrative it could be for a band or artist to endlessly tour the country or the world, stringing out performers to the point that the supposed glamour of the rock-and-roll lifestyle was replaced by routine and drudgery similar to what any office drone might encounter.

The best road songs capture the strange contrast between an artist drinking in the adoration of thousands of fans night after night and feeling utterly alone once the music stops. Bands have taken different approaches to this subject matter, from journalistic ("Lodi" by Creedence Clearwater Revival) to surreal ("Moonlight Mile" by The Rolling Stones) to sentimental ("Faithfully" by Journey). But perhaps no song has ever captured the life of a traveling musician with such bone-chilling accuracy as Bob Seger's "Turn The Page."

Seger began working on the song in 1972, but it wasn't complete until a touring pit stop provided the entire second verse. As Tom Weschler, road manager for the Silver Bullet Band remembered in *Travelin Man: On The Road And Behind The Scenes With Bob Seger*, which he co-wrote with Gary Graff: "I think we were in Dubuque, Iowa, in winter and stopped at a restaurant. We stood out when we entered a store or a gas station or a restaurant en masse. At this restaurant it was particularly bright inside, so there weren't any dark corners to hide in. All these local guys were looking at us like, 'What are these guys? Is that a woman or a man?' — just like in the song."

Seger penned the lines, "Most times you can't hear 'em talk, other times you can/ All the same old clichés, 'Is that a woman or a man?'" to commemorate the humiliating experience. "And you feel the eyes upon you as you're shaking off the cold/ You pretend it doesn't bother you but you just want to explode," he sings, the simmering tension dripping from his voice. He also explains that there's no recourse for the persecuted in this situation: "And you always seem outnumbered, you don't dare make a stand."

Before we reach that point of the song, Seger puts us on a tour bus in the middle of nowhere with nothing but road and time in front of our heroes. "You can think about the woman, or the girl you knew the night before," he sings, suggesting that the idleness of the lifestyle breeds infidelity. In the final verse, he relates the on-stage experience, but none of the glory comes through, just the effort and isolation: "Out there in the spotlight you're a million miles away/ Every ounce of energy you try to give away/ As the sweat pours out your body like the music that you play." The narrator is left alone in his hotel room, preparing to go through it all again the next night, to "turn the page."

The song needed an instrumental hook to capture the haunted tone of the lyrics, which is where saxophonist Alto Reed came in, with an assist from Weschler. Reed explained in a YouTube interview how he decided what to play: "Tom Weschler said,' You know, Alto, picture a black and white movie, *The Man With The Golden Arm*, late at night, rain on the street in the alley, you're standing beneath a streetlamp, there's a light mist coming down. What does that sound like? You hear a plaintive wail in the distance. What does that sound like?" Reed responded with one of the most iconic sax riffs in rock and roll history.

It's somehow fitting that perhaps the preeminent song about life on the road didn't really come to full fruition until it was rendered live. The studio version of the song, released by Seger in 1973 on *Back In '72*, ambles along but doesn't really catch fire. But on 1976's *Live Bullet*, which stood tall in a great era for live rock albums that included *Frampton Comes Alive* and *Cheap Trick At Budokan*, the Silver Bullet Band sinks into a sultry groove, Reed's saxophone pierces the air, and Seger sings the stuffing out of the song, especially in the final chorus when he trades in his weariness and wariness for defiance and triumph.

Countless road songs have come and gone since that definitive performance four decades ago, and, in truth, they're mostly playing for second. Not even Metallica's scorching cover of the song in 1999 matches the power of the Silver Bullet Band's live take. With "Turn The Page," Bob Seger not only put us inside the shoes of a rock star, he made us wonder whether those shoes are worth inhabiting. ★

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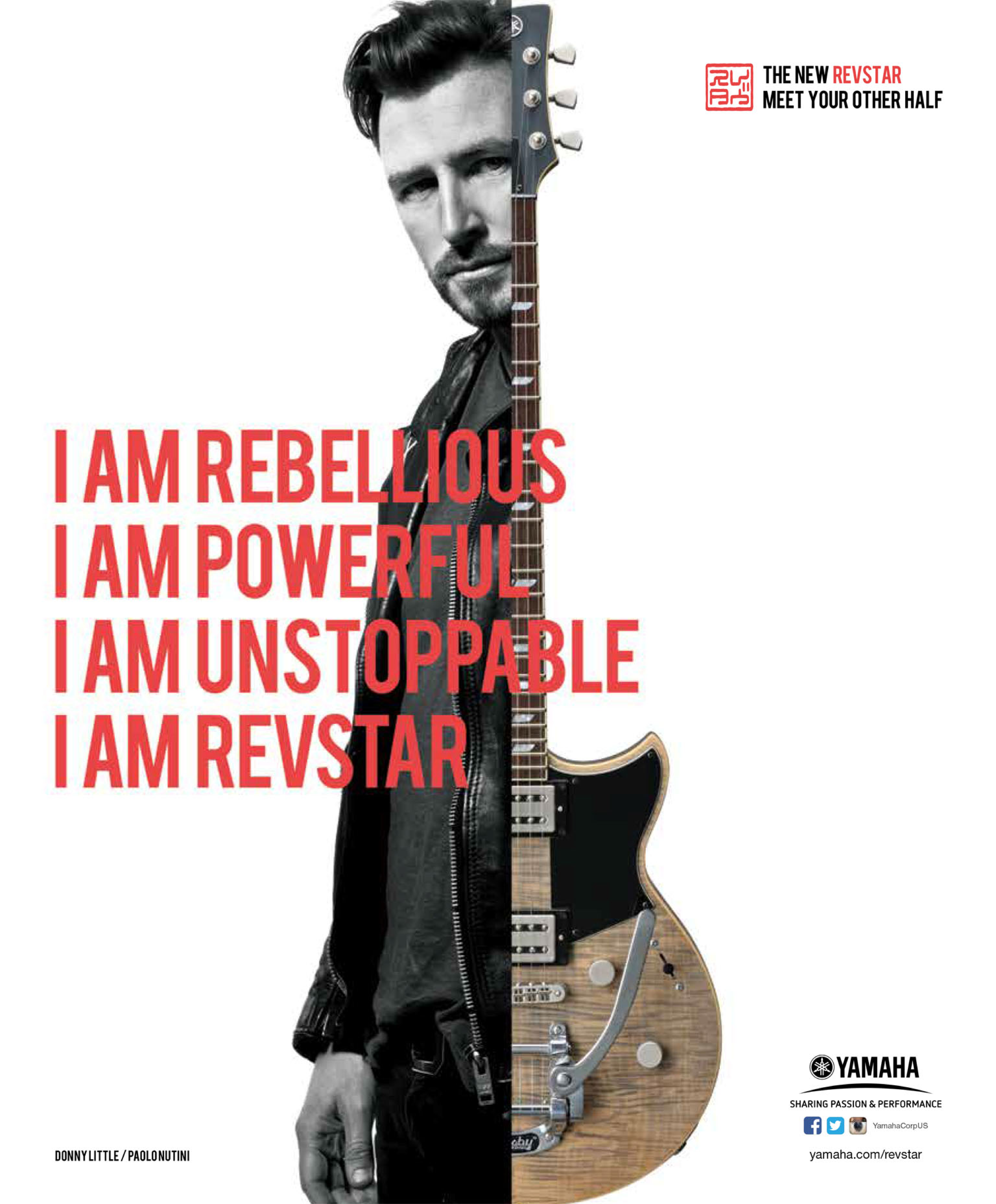
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